REVISE FOR THE STARS:

DICTION, SYNTAX, AND RHYTHM TO GARNER STARRED REVIEWS

by

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Consider drafting and revision as two stages for writers. Not just stages in the process of writing, but physical constructions to step out on, to move and build upon. On the drafting stage, writers improvise, play, act out. They discover the story, audition characters, and cast the protagonist. This is the tryout stage, the practice stage. The other is the *in*-practice stage, the *rehearse because the audience is waiting* stage—revision.

Revision is the stage upon which writers rehearse, design, and direct. However, writers should not take this stage lightly. Revising word choice too early—like before a draft is complete—is the equivalent of fitting costumes before the actors are cast. Likewise, revising the syntax of sentences too soon is like trying to block out a play without knowing how big the stage will be. However, once writers know their story from beginning to end—the who, what, where, when, why, and how—then they can design and direct their words, sentences, and paragraphs through revision.

The stage directions herein are for star-eyed authors, the writers who want Kirkus *et alia* to review the rhythm of their words, to sing praises of their prose poetic, to laud their literary voices. Citing examples from six Kirkus star-reviewed novels, I will illustrate how writers can employ a practical knowledge of diction, syntax, and rhythm to design and direct a positively remarkable reading experience.

Style Is Voice

Together, these three elements of style—diction, syntax, and rhythm—develop your writing voice. Put simply, voice is how your narration and characters sound. Joe Glaser equates style with voice in his introduction to *Understanding Style: Practical Ways to Improve Your Writing*:

> A powerful but woefully under-discussed influence on readers is the sound of your written words, which they hear inside their heads as they subvocalize. … They "listen" to this mental speech as if it were spoken aloud. The voice readers hear in your writing is a blend of the [syntax], diction, and sound qualities of your language. All of these should fit your writing situation. (4)

Glaser's book is targeted to nonfiction writers, so to him, "writing situation" is the purpose and audience of a text. If you are a *star*-eyed novelist (that is, you revise in hopes of starred reviews), your writing situation includes the situations into which you've written your characters—where they are both physically and emotionally in a scene. The starred review for *As Brave As You* by Jason Reynolds summarizes his novel as "Richly voiced third person narrative, tightly focused through Genie's point of view." Reynolds' diction, syntax, and rhythm are relevant not only to his middle-grade readers, but also to Genie (the protagonist) and the situations he finds himself in.

To show how you can revise for positively remarkable (and reviewable) voice, I'll first consult advice on revising diction in general. Then I'll separate syntax into three practical categories—nouns, verbs, and modifiers—and share structural possibilities for each. Finally, to illustrate how diction and syntax can make or break rhythm, I'll rewrite a passage from *As Brave As You* to be negatively remarkable, analyzing the effects each passage has on the reading experience.

Diction

Diction is the words and imagery an author chooses when telling a story. In *Understanding Style*, Glaser recommends choosing specific, concrete, relevant words and

imagery, not generic, vague, or abstract language.

Specific words and imagery paint a clearer picture for the reader than generic or vague descriptions. "If you choose particular words when possible, your writing will seem more lively and clear" (Glaser 65). Qualifiers like *very*, *really*, *lots of,* or *a lot* are vague modifiers, but nouns and verbs can also be vague: *Somebody* is less specific than *a woman*, which is less specific than *Julia Monroe* or *the woman who stole my sandwich*. Likewise *moved* is less specific than *walked*, which is less specific than *ambled*. Vagueness is fine in first drafts when writers need to see the forest from the trees, but in revision, writers need to see particular trees, and deadwood qualifiers should be harvested and burned for fuel.

On the other hand, too much specificity is also a problem. To avoid, as Glaser puts it, becoming "enmeshed in the creative genius style of overwriting," writers should go easy on the specifics (65). Choosing one relevant, remarkable detail that strengthens characterization, emotion, or setting is more memorable and less overwhelming for readers than providing a smattering of information.

Glaser also recommends concrete, not abstract, diction. "An abstract word names [or describes] something that cannot be seen, heard, touched, tasted, or smelled; a concrete word names something that can. … Concrete terms enliven your style. They help readers sense what you're talking about, not just apprehend it mentally" (66). Or, as poet William Carlos Williams sings, "No ideas but in things" (qtd. in Oliver 19).

That isn't to say that you should abandon abstractions entirely. In Tahereh Mafi's *Whichwood,* the omniscient narrator tells the story with plenty of abstractions. However, Mafi's "deliciously descriptive prose," as Kirkus calls it, connects the characters' abstract emotions and ideas to concrete, sensory experiences. Laylee doesn't just feel *regret* or *remorse*, but "would

one day look back on these early moments with Alice and Oliver with heartbreaking regret—a remorse so parasitic it would follow her forever" (Mafi 70). While "heartbreaking" has become a cliche, it comes from a sensory connection, anchoring an abstract feeling to one's body, connecting it to the physical sensation of something breaking. "Parasitic" is also sensory, coming from "parasite." "A remorse so parasitic it would follow her forever" is a specific type of remorse much more evocative than "She was just really kinda remorseful, bro."

However, if *Whichwood* were narrated by a strung-out snowboarder, then the hazy-casual "really kinda remorseful, bro" would fit the narrative tone. Each word and phrase has an underlying tone or connotation formed by its origin and sound. "The more you know about the history, weight, and meaning of words, the more words you'll get right" (Glaser 60). Deciding on the "right" word means considering synonyms in light of the viewpoint character's background and current emotional state. Mafi's diction is particularly noteworthy because she filters her protagonist's emotional state through an empathetic narrator's point of view. It's two views for the price of one.

Omniscient narrators have more freedom when choosing synonyms because they are not limited to one character's background. First-person and limited-third narrators have cultural relevance to worry about—do the connotations and origins of their words feel authentic to their character? The starred reviews for both *Summer Bird Blue* and *Louisiana's Way Home* highlight the authors' ability to be "convincing." Unconvincing diction is often awkwardly formal or informal.

Most words in English have Latinate or Anglo-Saxon origins, with Latinate words feeling more formal or scholarly and Anglo-Saxon or Germanic words feeling more informal or instinctive. Glaser gives examples of how different origins have gifted us synonyms, each with

its own connotation: “Do your companions *dawdle* (English), *dally* (Anglo-French), *delay* (Middle French), *lag* (Scandinavian), *loiter* (Dutch), or *procrastinate* (Latin)?” (60). Each of these words carries a slightly different meaning. *Dawdling* characters frustrate the impatient in their midst but might inspire others to stop and smell roses. *Procrastinating* characters are shirking off some responsibility, frustrating anyone who depends on them. “Each synonym expresses a different shade of meaning and level of formality,” Glaser warns. “No matter what Roget [the thesaurus] says, don’t use a word unless you’re dead sure it’s right for the place you want to put it” (62).

Part of a word’s tone comes from its origin, but another comes from its sound: literally the way our tongues form the word. In *A Poetry Handbook,* Mary Oliver discusses and defines vowels, semivowels, consonants, mutes, liquids, and aspirates, concluding, “Now we see that words have not only a definition and possibly a connotation, but also the *felt* quality of their own kind of sound” (22).

Sounds are especially important in dialogue, because the sounds coming out of characters’ mouths give insight to what kinds of people they are. When writing a stodgy headmistress character, you might consider generic terms like *mean* or *cold*. Perhaps you could be more specific, choosing Latinate, harsh sounding words like *severe*, *strict*, *austere*. Stacey Lee’s headmistress in *Outrun the Moon* has a grouchy-sounding name—*Crouch*. She is described as having a severe appearance when introduced on page sixty-seven, complete with back-hump and hair bun. Abstractions and superficial, visual details work during initial descriptions because readers don’t know the character yet. Readers get to know characters by what they do, what they say, and how they say it. Crouch reveals more about herself when she rails on peacocks: “You are fortunate [to have never seen one]. They squawk as loud as someone

being murdered. Messy, too. We used to keep a pair on the grounds, but after a month of that vexation, I had our cook roast them for dinner" (67).

Elsewhere in her dialogue, Headmistress Crouch tends to favor Latinate terms (*fortunate*, *vexation*, *roast*), but here, she also sprinkles more colorful language: the onomatopoeic *squawk*, the appalled *murdered*, the candid *messy*. The subtext here is that when Crouch is set off by a pair of birds, the veil of formality she constructs for herself starts to lift. Her diction changes depending on her mood. A less developed, more generic character would not only have less to say about peacocks, but would also talk about them in bland, forced, or even erratic diction: "You ain't missing much. They are loud and disorderly. We had a couple, but after two fortnights, we proceeded to gobble them."

Once the protagonist and first-person narrator of *Outrun the Moon*—Mercy—gets to know the headmistress better, she describes Crouch in less abstract, more concrete terms, filtered through her own experiences and in her own tone of voice: "I nod, my mouth dry. Headmistress Crouch has an uncanny talent for sucking the moisture out of the room" (70).

Star-eyed writers filter their imagery through the perception and attitude of their viewpoint character. Imagery or words that come instead from the author's own point of view can eject readers from the reality of the story's setting. This disconnect is less of an issue with omniscient narrators, but author-insert imagery is especially jarring within historical or other-world fiction.

I will never forget the one line which made me question the reality of *The Folk Keeper*, a novel I otherwise truly enjoy: "The Music Room was small by Manor standards (not big enough to hold more than fifty elephants), and all white and gold, with huge marble fireplaces that yawned into the room with tongues of flame" (Billingsley 50). Corinna, the protagonist, tells the

story in first person, so all imagery should come from her imagination. But we have no reason to believe that Corinna has ever seen—nor ever even heard of—elephants because she grew up in the Northern Isles which, presumably, was too isolated and bucolic to have ever been visited by a traveling zoo or circus. Not to mention most of Corinna's life was *subterranean*. Using ships, carriages, trees, or livestock as a unit of measurement would have been more believable within Corinna's experience.

Negatively remarkable diction is irrelevant or haphazard. Unremarkable diction is vague, abstract, or unfocused. Positively remarkable diction is balanced: "Skillful writers mix general and particular, abstract and concrete, long and short, learned and commonplace, connotative and neutral words to administer a series of small but telling surprises" (Glaser 64). Balance and surprises in diction come from which and how words are used within three syntactic functions.

Syntax

Syntax is how words and phrases are arranged in a sentence. You don't need to know how to diagram sentences in order to revise for syntax. In fact, you can also forget what you remember about the parts of speech, because they mean nothing without context. For example, what part of speech is *round*?

… an adjective?

Only sometimes! I might offer this sentence: "In each *round*, the *round* cyclist will *round* the corner *round* the bend." Here, *round* functions as a noun, adjective, verb, and adverb, respectively (if not respectably).

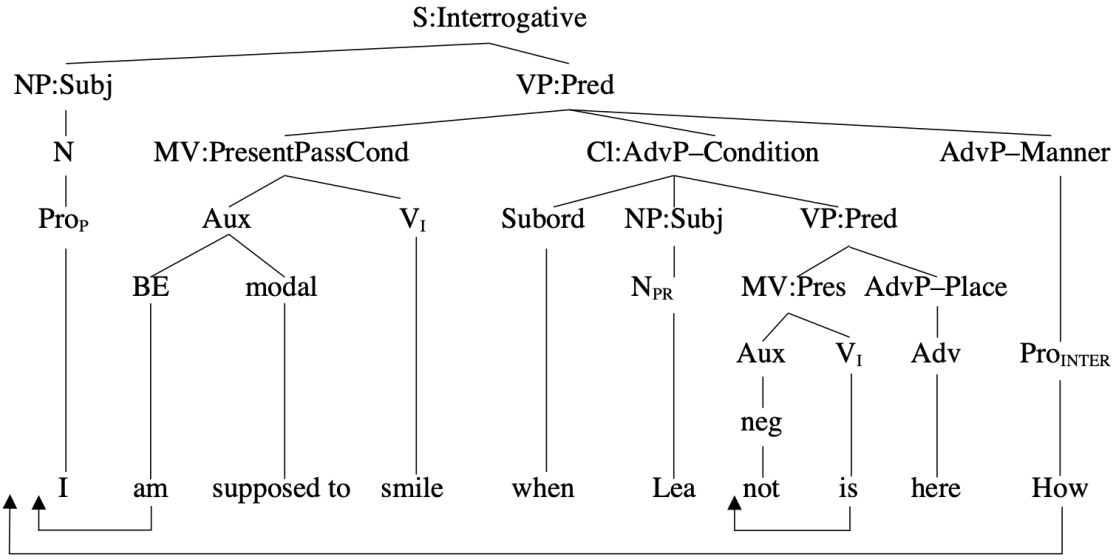
Function is what matters, and English grammar has four main functions. Traditionally, these are the noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. Nouns are *who* and *what* the sentence is about.

The main noun is the subject. Verbs are actions and synonyms of *is* (e.g., *am, are, was, were, will be, become, seem*). They tell us what nouns do, whether subjects *are*, and what happens. Adjectives tell more about a noun, answering the question of *which one*. Adverbs answer questions about the verb: *Why? How? To what extent? Where? When?*

The confusion comes when we open these functions up to groups of words, because "nouns" and "verbs" can show up inside adverbial and adjectival phrases and clauses. Phrases are groups of words functioning together. Clauses are also coworking words, but they only unionize if a noun and a verb are involved. For practical purposes, I include single and hyphenated words, phrases, and clauses when I say "groups." Furthermore, "modifying groups" includes both adjective groups and adverb groups.

Put in stage terms, noun groups are **actors**, the **leading actor** being the subject of the sentence. Verb groups are **acting**—what the leading actor is or was doing (or what they simply *are*). Adjective groups are the **design**—of character and set. Adverb groups are the **direction**—director's notes on the character's motivations and the blocking of the scene.

Take this sentence from the McLuhan page of *Summer Bird Blue*: "How am I supposed to smile when Lea isn't here?" Simplified into stage terms, *I* is the leading actor, *am supposed to smile* is the acting, and *when Lea isn't here* is the direction. This simplification is much easier to parse than the method of diagramming sentences I'm most familiar with, taught in *Guide for the Advancing Grammarian:*



The McLuhan page is a book's sixty-ninth page. The McLuhan Test asserts that, rather than viewing the first or final pages of a book, prospective readers should look to the sixty-ninth page for an accurate gauge of the author's natural style (Sutherland 61). In the following sections, I'll use examples from six Kirkus starred novels to illustrate options for structuring **acting** (verb groups), **actors** (noun groups), and **design and direction** (modifying groups). In each quote, unless mentioned otherwise, the sentence comes from the novel's McLuhan page or its surrounding scene.

Acting: What is happening?

If we want to see what is happening with a sentence, we need to see what is happening *in* the sentence, so we will start out of order with the main verb. To find the main verb group in a sentence, ask *what is happening*. Then ask what would change if it *would happen* tomorrow, and what would change if it *had happened* yesterday. This trick—conjugating the sentence—works

best for fluent English speakers. Add *tomorrow* or *yesterday* to the beginning of the sentence, and see what group of words needs to change for the sentence to make sense. In *Louisiana's Way Home,* DiCamillo writes "He looked like a pirate, standing up there with the crow on his shoulder." This could have happened yesterday, but if it happened tomorrow, he *would look* like a pirate, standing up there with the crow on his shoulder. Though *standing* seems like it could be a verb, it doesn't have to change in this sentence, so *looked* is the main verb. All verb groups can be set in present tense (what *happens* or *is*) or past tense (what *happened* or *was*), and they may include extra words—qualifiers, particles, embedded adverbs, or auxiliaries—to make them negative, conditional, passive, progressive, pluperfect, or predictive. Those extra words can all be stripped down to a simple verb. In *Whichwood,* Mafi's narrator uses plenty of clusters, like *couldn't help but wonder*, which could be simplified to *wondered*.

Is simple always best? Auxiliaries get a bad rap. Emergent writers on Twitter routinely decry *was* in particular, to the point in 2015 that I felt the need to blog about when such words shouldn't be deleted (Willard). However, all six of my source novels use complex verb groups. Of the novels' McLuhan scenes, *Whichwood* probably has the sentence I'm most happy to simplify and not diagram: "Oliver wouldn't dare break another bedroom window, nor could he bring himself to use his magic against her" (68). Structurally, this sentence includes two infinitives (one *to*-less), but if we prioritize function over structure, we can consider *wouldn't dare break* as one verb group and *could[n't] bring himself to use* as the other. Simplified, these would be *wouldn't break* and *couldn't use*, but stripping the verb groups of auxiliaries would change the meaning of the text: "Oliver *wouldn't* break another window and *couldn't* use his magic against her" suggests stubbornness or inability, while Mafi's published sentence suggests caution and resolve.

The remaining novels' McLuhan scenes also provide plenty of auxiliary-laden verb groups:

- *Louisiana's Way Home*—took off flying, went running, grabbed hold of, couldn't wait to make
- *As Brave As You*—was trying to figure out, was up to
- *Tess of the Road*—might dash, had rendered, couldn't have seen, could only keep, was not going to play
- *Outrun the Moon*—begin to doubt, would have to convince, didn't warn, do not do, can hardly see
- *Summer Bird Blue*—am supposed to smile, has never been, can practically feel

Auxiliaries occur frequently in natural conversation, so using them can help a written voice feel more authentic. However, too many can dam up sentences with deadwood, and they can reveal passive constructions (*was eaten, had been considered*).

Dynamic verbs are active and energetic, more empowering and interesting than passive verbs or linking verbs (*is, was, am*). To illustrate dull or generic examples of writing, I've chosen limp-noodle verbs. Star-eyed writers, though, will consider artfully elevated verbs, or "richly voiced" as in the case of *As Brave as You* (Kirkus). Like a twenty-first century Shakespeare, Reynolds morphs words that Merriam–Webster wouldn't consider verbs—like *honey* and *karate*—into acting groups, underlined here (italics from original): "Boy, if you don't go to sleep, I'<u>m a honey</u> *your* badger" and "[Ernie] <u>commenced to karatisizing</u> Down the Street Donnie, all the way … down the street" (8, 13). However, if you give every sentence a punchy verb, you will exhaust your readers. Dynamic, emotionally authentic characters shift between movement and

contemplation, so their acting will vary between hyper-specific and generic, simple and complex verb groups. Again, balanced diction is the goal.

Actors: Whom or what is this about?

The main subject of a sentence is the **leading actor (lead)**, or the subject of the sentence. If a noun group is not what the core of the sentence is about, it is likely part of a modifying group, especially if it follows a preposition (see the section on Design and Direction). However, other functions do exist for noun groups as supporting actors. **Supports** are the *direct object* of the verb—they support the lead's acting. They might be props, supporting characters, or supporting ideas (abstract noun groups). **Nominations** rename or title another noun. Rounding out the noun-group ensemble is the **recipient** or *indirect object*, to whom or what the lead can give a support.

In this line from *Whichwood,* Mafi nominates and gives a support to her lead: "Alice, a decidedly tender girl, couldn't help but wonder if perhaps she and Oliver were the problem." *Alice* is the lead. *A decidedly tender girl* is Alice's nomination. The acting verb group is *couldn't help but wonder*, and the noun group that supports the lead's acting, its direct object, is the whole clause *if perhaps she and Oliver were the problem*.

My classification of the **nomination** function combines three traditional grammar functions. A **lead nomination** placed between the lead and acting verb (like *a decidedly tender girl* in the sentence above) is a *nominal appositive*, but place it after a linking verb, and it becomes a *predicate nominative*: "Alice is *a decidedly tender girl*." Supports can also be nominated: "The narrator called Alice *a decidedly tender girl*." **Supporting nominations** are called *object complements* because they complement the direct object.

Noun groups can take several forms. Mafi's "a decidedly tender girl" is a **noun phrase** with an article, adjective, and qualifier. **Clauses** can play the part of actors, like in Lee's direct object, "I begin to doubt *that I will even make it past the first step*." A clause is a group of words with its own lead actor and action, and a noun clause often starts with *that*, *how*, or a *wh-* subordinator (Black 112). Bowman's "smiling about boys" is a **gerund phrase**—an -ing verb group functioning as an actor—in this sentence, playing the lead: "Besides, *smiling about boys* has never been my thing." **Infinitive phrases**—*to*-verb groups sometimes preceded by a *for*-noun group—can also play actor, like in Hartman's direct object "She longed *to crawl into a hole and die*." Sometimes infinitive phrases drop their *to*s and *for*s. DiCamillo drops what would be an awkward "for Granny" in "I had never known *Granny to tremble*." Though rare, the "for" before an infinitive doesn't always sound awkward. For example, Hartman could have written this: "Tess longed *for Jacomo to crawl into a hole and die*."

Noun groups have several **functions** as actors: leads (subject), supports (direct objects), nominations (predicate nominatives and nominal appositives, and nominal object complements), and recipients (indirect objects). Noun groups can also take several **forms**: noun phrases, noun clauses (with an internal lead actor and action), gerund phrases (*-ing* verb groups, like *acting*), and infinitive phrases (verb groups taking the infinitive form, like *[to] act out*).

Noun groups also show up frequently as objects of prepositional phrases. Prepositional phrases can never find work as actors, but don't feel bad for them. They find plenty of work as designers and directors.

Design and Direction: How can we shape the reader's experience?

I mention adjective and adverb groups together because they often take identical forms,

whether costuming characters, designing the stage, managing props, or directing the action. They aren't necessary for a black box stage production, but they are more important for impacting readers—and generating star reviews—than they get credit for.

Indeed, if auxiliaries have a bad rap, modifiers have been wrongly convicted and sentenced to death, victims of writers killing their darlings. When craft books mention adverbs or adjectives at all, it's usually advice to delete them. "I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs," says Stephen King in *On Writing* (125). King recommends cutting all adverbs, but he accepts that some will remain in our manuscripts because, well, "no writer is entirely without sin in these matters" (128). The late Sol Stein told one of his students to cut all the adjectives and adverbs from his entire book. Stein recounts in *How to Grow a Novel*, "The manuscript turned out seventy-two pages shorter, and, of course, the elimination of adjectives and adverbs made it stronger" (223). Ursula K. Le Guin leads her students through a similar exercise as Stein, but I prefer her moderate, clarified stance on modifiers:

> Adjectives and adverbs are good and rich and nourishing. They add color, life, immediacy. [But when] the quality that the adverbs indicates can be put in the verb itself (they ran quickly = they *raced*) or the quality the adjective indicates can be put in the noun itself (a growling voice = a *growl*), the prose will be cleaner, more intense, more vivid. (43)

Instilling modifiers into more specific, concrete nouns and verbs does make the nouns and verbs stronger—because it improves their diction—but modifying groups craft the reader's experience of a story. Adjective groups decide "which one"—which character, which feeling, which place, which state of mind. Adverb groups direct the action by answering adverb questions: when, why, how, in which direction, in what manner, to what extent. I will give examples, but first, I

need to debunk the myth that modifiers must die. Even single-word adjectives and adverbs, to which writing experts usually refer, are necessary in some cases, especially setting description.

However, literary agent Donald Maass impugns modifiers even when discussing setting and description. In *Writing the Breakout Novel,* he quotes a paragraph from Anne Rivers Siddon's *Up Island*, claiming "It is the details, the nouns and verbs rather than *any* adjectives or adverbs, that visually fix the scene" (86, emphasis mine). The problem with Maass's quick dismissal is that if we remove all modifying groups from Siddon's passage, we'd be left with just forty-three of her original 222 words:

> The house stood [redacted] the lane [redacted] wound [redacted] But [redacted] there was nothing [redacted] the ridge beetled [redacted] no trees grew [redacted] I looked [redacted] and caught my breath [redacted] It was a day [redacted], and the [redacted] vista [redacted] seemed [redacted] it disquieted me [redacted]. I had come here [redacted] but this [redacted] house [redacted] offered me no place [redacted]. (qtd. in Maass 85-86, original in appendix)

Eighty-one percent of the passage Maass uses as an example to deride adjectives and adverbs is made up of words serving those functions! Yes, "beetled" is a precisely evocative verb. Otherwise, Siddon's adjectives travail in painting the texture of the scene. Modifying groups aside, Mass would sacrifice these single and hyphenated modifiers:

> *steel-blue* sky; *low, dense* woodlands; *wind-stunted* oaks; *near-to-collapsing* buildings; *huge, freestanding* boulders; *low-growing blueberry* and *huckleberry* bushes; *erratic* winds; *running cloud* shadow; *patchwork* vista; trees and ocean moving *restlessly*, *up-island* wood; *tall, blind* house, *alone* in its … dazzle of *hard, shifting* light

Should Siddon kill these darlings? A wind-stunted oak evokes a different feeling than an unmodified one. A steel-blue sky is colder than an unremarkably blue one. "How does your setting make people feel?" asked Maass just one page before. "That is the key, not how a place looks but its psychological effect on the characters in your novel" (85). The truth is, while single-word modifiers might tell readers how characters feel (*mad*) or what a place looks like (*dark*), modifying groups can *show* readers how characters feel and what your fictional world looks like. First I'll review the function of modifying groups, and then I'll show the forms or structures they can take. Knowing the different forms and employing them will diversify prose, elevating it from monotonous Dick-and-Jane, See-Spot-Run syntax. To share how each form is used in my star-reviewed source novels, I will again take examples from their McLuhan scenes.

The function of modifying groups is fairly straightforward: they either function as **design**, describing or detailing **actors**, or they function as **direction**, modifying **actions**. Modifying groups can appear almost anywhere in a sentence, their location changing the rhythm and, as dangling or misplaced modifiers, sometimes altering the meaning. Adjectives which **label** a feature of an **actor** correspond to **nominations**, with correlating traditional names. So a

label that follows a linking verb is a predicate adjective, but it can be moved to become an appositive (set off by commas or em-dashes) or an object complement (if labeling a direct object). In the McLuhan scene of *Tess of the Road,* Hartman's protagonist is *reeling and nauseated* (predicate adjective label). Hartman could have written, "Tess, *reeling and nauseated*, forced her mind back to the present" (appositive label). Or she could have made the label into an object complement: "The memory left Tess *reeling and nauseated*." Hartman chose the appositive but moved its location to the end of the sentence, creating a label of the lead which lingers in the reader's mind: "Tess forced her mind back to the present, *reeling and nauseated*." (Such creativity does come at a cost, however. Readers could interpret the phrase as modifying *present* or consider it misplaced because it is adjacent to the "wrong" noun.)

The **form** of modifying groups may also mirror those of nominals. Like **actors**, **design** and **direction** groups may take the form of **noun phrases**, **clauses**, and **infinitive phrases**. In *Outrun the Moon,* Lee uses all three on one page: "One threadbare eyebrow lifts *a fraction*" (noun phrase directing *lifts*), "That seems the safest lie, *as tea is China's greatest export*" (clause directing *seems*), and "I hope that one's hard *to remember*" (infinitive design, complementing the predicate adjective *hard*). Adverb clauses start with subordinating conjunctions; adjective clauses, with relative pronouns (Black 82, 131).

Unlike actors, design and direction groups can also take the form of **absolutes**, **participial phrases**, and—most commonly—**prepositional phrases**. Prepositional phrases start with a preposition and end with a nominal group. English has a limited list of prepositions, but rather than memorizing the list, just look for short words preceding nouns and see if the group as a whole **designs** another **actor** or **directs** the **acting**. Mafi uses four prepositions in this sentence from *Whichwood*: "It is, *after all*, a simple and tragic thing that *on occasion* our unkindness *to*

others is actually a desperate effort to be kind *to ourselves*." Whether individual modifying groups are adverbial or adjectival (or complements) is less important than whether they are relevant to the reader and are necessary design or direction. Mafi clarifies what she means by *desperate effort* with the **infinitive phrase** *to be kind*, which she completes with the **prepositional phrase** *to ourselves*. Both are necessary modifiers for the reader to know what Mafi means.

The second structure unique to modifying groups is the **participial phrase**, which begins with a verb taking the progressive (*-ing*) form or passive ([have been] *-en*/*ed*) form. Reynolds' "thumping his way to the bottom" is an active participial phrase starting with the *-ing* verb *thumping*, an action which in turn is directed by noun phrase *his way* and prepositional phrase *to the bottom*. Passive participial phrases are tougher to spot because passive verbs don't all end in the same suffix. They may end in *-en* or *-n*, like Bowman's design: "I catch sight of the name badge *sewn over his chest*." More often they end in *-ed*, like in Hartman's direction: "She could only keep her eyes *fixed on the floor, her skirts, or Jacomo's black-clad knee*."

The final structure of modifying groups is the **absolute**, a clause that has lost its auxiliary or linking verb. Less common in everyday speech, absolutes frequently show up in star-reviewed prose. Why? They are secret weapons for revising prose weighed down with auxiliaries. For example, DiCamillo could have written this sentence: "Each one of them was giving off its own special light." Instead, she dropped the auxiliary *was* and turned the clause into an absolute, modifying a larger sentence: "It glowed with all of its special objects—ballpoint pens, cheese-filled crackers, candy bars, rain bonnets—*each one of them giving off its own special light*."

Adjective groups **design** the story, its players, and its setting. Adverb groups **direct** the action. Modifying groups show (and tell) readers where the viewpoint character is, both

physically and mentally, shaping the emotional experience of the reader. Likewise, the rhythm of the sentences—deeply affected by the length and placement of modifying groups—can affect the reader's experience.

Rhythm

Rhythm is a pattern caused by breaks and pauses. Ursula K. Le Guin, in an interview with David Naiman for *The Writer's Chronicle*, discusses the importance of rhythm in a writer's voice:

> If you are hearing what you write, then you can listen for the right cadence, which will help the sentence run clear. And what young writers always talk about—"finding your voice"—well, you can't find your own voice if you aren't listening for it. The sound of your writing is an essential part of what it's doing. Our teaching of writing tends to ignore it, except maybe in poetry. And so we get prose that goes clunk, clunk, clunk. And we don't know what's wrong with it.

When writers and reviewers do discuss rhythm, they tend to discuss sound qualities and readability—how quickly, slowly, smoothly, or clumsily the words flow together. They may follow Le Guin's standard unit of measurement in *Steering the Craft*, which is sentence length. "Rhythm of prose depends very much—very prosaically—on the *length* of the sentences" (23, emphasis original). Yet the end of a sentence is just one type of pause. Poets use stanzas and line breaks, and in prose, writers break paragraphs and end sentences full stop. But internal punctuation pauses readers, like you, too.

The purpose of revising for rhythm is to direct, remotely, the performance put on in readers' imagination. Yes, remote direction sounds a little like mind control, but what star-eyed

writers are really doing is purposefully shaping the rhythm of their prose and, in so doing, strengthening their reader's empathic ties to their viewpoint character. How?

It all comes down to breaths.

Readability tests like the Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level, when determining how difficult a text is to read, consider both sentence length and syllable-to-word ratios (Linney). However, a good test for vocalized readability (and therefore believable voice) considers rather syllable-to-*pause* ratios, or the number of syllables uttered before punctuation allows some respite. Glaser calls these "breath units":

> The words [and syllables] between these pauses are called breath units because you say them together at one go before catching your breath at the pause. … Mixing longer and shorter units creates changes in rhythm. English speakers tend to speak each breath unit in the same amount of time, going faster or slower in keeping with the number of syllables they need to fit in. … The closer a written sentence comes to the music of a well-formed spoken one, the more human and credible its "voice" seems. (4-5)

Throughout *Understanding Style*, Glaser gives standards and guidelines for syllable-to-word ratios and syllable counts in breath units. *Time Magazine*'s average is 1.4 syllables per word (12). A ratio of 1.75, though, is "not outrageously high" (24), but "syllable/ word ratios over 2 and syllable/breath unit ratios over 25 are danger signs" of text that is unreadable or too complex (37). Glaser also warns against monotonous breath units, a series of segments with syllables all falling in the 15- to 25-syllable range (37).

Generic versus Jason

To illustrate how the above tools can be used in revision, I have taken an excerpt from

Jason Reynold's *As Brave As You* and rewritten it to have monotonous rhythm and unremarkable language, committing various first-draft offenses:

> Genie followed Ernie down the trepidatious hill. Because the hill was steep, their pace quickened. They began to slide and tried their best to stay upright. Ernie had better balance because he was in karate. He could even stand on one leg for seventy-four seconds, Genie knew. Genie slipped though, because he was not as good at balancing.

Compare my "first draft" version with Reynolds' published version:

> Genie scrambled after him, trying to step easy, but dang, that hill was steep. Too steep. Gravity yanked them both toward the bottom a lot faster than they had expected. They started to slide and whoa, whoa, whoa, doing everything they could to stay upright. Ernie had better balance—you had to have it to be any good at karate. I mean, he could stand on one leg for seventy-four seconds. Genie had counted. Genie, on the other hand, didn't have that talent, and after a few seconds of sliding down the hill, he slipped. (69)

The rhythm in Reynolds' paragraph is far superior, but how did he do it? To visualize and compare the rhythms, I represent a syllable with "o," a word break with a space, a pause from internal punctuation with an em-dash "—," and a sentence break with a line break. I list the average syllable-to-word ratio per breath unit at the end of each line. This is my generic version:

oo oo oo o o oooo o (1.86)

oo o o o o—o o oo (1.2—1.3)

o oo o o o o o o o o oo (1.18)

oo o oo oo oo o o o ooo (1.67)

o o oo o o o o o ooo o oo—oo o (1.5—1.5)

oo o o—oo o o o o o o ooo (1—1.57)

My version was at least readable, with no breath units measuring more than twenty-five syllables, but the graph shows little variation in my sentence length, with only three shorter pauses to mix up the monotony—one comma for every two sentences. Compare that graph with the one for Reynold's version, which has a mix of breath unit and sentence lengths and more commas than sentences:

oo oo oo o—oo o o oo—o o—o o o o (1.75—1.5–1—1)

o o (1)

ooo o o o o o oo o o oo o o o ooo (1.4)

o oo o o o o—o—o—oo ooo o o o o oo (1.17—1—1—1.6)

oo o oo oo—o o o o o o o oo o o ooo (1.75—1.3)

o o—o o o o o o o o ooo o oo (1—1.3)

oo o oo (1.67)

oo—o o oo o—oo o o oo—o oo o o oo o oo o o o—o o (2—1.25—1.5—1.3—1)

Should writers graph out their sentences when revising? Only if they can't tell why a sentence sounds off, and even then, I wouldn't recommend this type of microanalysis on any chapter besides the first, since first impressions matter most. However, graphing and comparing paragraphs illustrates how—and why—some strings of text have better rhythm than others.

What writers *can* apply to their own work is the consideration of how breath unit length can amplify the mood in a scene. The clunky rhythm in my version works against what the words say is happening in the scene. Reynolds' rhythm supports the plot and the mood of the viewpoint character. For example, Reynolds' third sentence uses a long breath unit of twenty syllables. Longer breath units are read more quickly, and this speed tracks with Genie: "Gravity yanked them both toward the bottom a lot faster than they had expected." His second sentence, the one

just before this, is just two syllables in two words, as if the reader is vocalizing his "uh oh" before the slip. Reynolds' repetition of "whoas" in the fourth sentence with commas in between—rather than a hyphenated *whoa-whoa-whoa*—creates a panic not just from the words but from the extra breaths a reader would take when vocalizing the commas. The reader is, in a sense, hyperventilating, as Genie probably is too.

To strengthen rhythm, consider breath units and syllable distribution. Purposeful breath units can be read out loud in a single breath, their length tracks with the breathing rate of a character in the scene, and they reinforce the reader's emotional experience of the viewpoint character's mood.

The Curtain Calls

Revision complete, you, Author, are the auteur, the creative genius who designed and directed the work about to be reviewed. The stage is set, with backdrops you painted and props you mastered. The ensemble is ready with actors you cast. The acting is blocked—through your direction, the characters will move themselves and, hopefully, their audience. Your actors rehearsed in full dress, with costumes, hair, makeup, and diction you fit yourself. The rhythm orchestra sound all your instruments of syntax, baiting and abating readers' breaths with beats.

Intentional diction, syntax, and rhythm—these are the hallmarks of remarkable style, the production of prose which garners star reviews.

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Appendix 1: Siddons, Unedited

This is the intact opening paragraph of *Up Island*'s chapter seven, written by Anne Rivers Siddons and quoted by Donald Maass:

> The house stood in full sun on the slope of a ridge that seemed to sweep directly up into the steel-blue sky. Below it, the lane I had just driven on wound through low, dense woodlands, where the Jeep had plunged in and out of dark shade. But up here there was nothing around the house except a sparse stand of wind-stunted oaks, several near-to-collapsing outbuildings, and two or three huge, freestanding bounders left, I knew, by the receding glacier that had formed this island. Above the house, the ridge beetled like a furrowed brow, matted with low-growing blueberry and huckleberry bushes. At the top, no trees grew at all. I looked back and down and caught my breath at the panorama of Chilmark Pond and the Atlantic Ocean. It was a day of strange, erratic winds and running cloud shadow, and the patchwork vista below me seemed alive, pulsing with shadow and sun, trees and ocean moving restlessly in the wind. Somehow it disquieted me so that I had to turn and face the closed door of the big, old house. I had come here seeking the shelter of the up-island woods, but this tall, blind house, alone in its ocean of space and dazzle of hard, shifting light, offered me no place to hide.

Appendix 2: Further Reading, an Annotated List of Kirkus Stars for Style

I read every Kirkus starred review for middle-grade and young-adult books with a publication date between 2015 and 2019. Fewer than thirty directly addressed the style of the writing, so it is certainly probable that works with pedestrian prose can also garner Kirkus stars. However, since my thesis specifically explores *positively remarkable style* in star-reviewed novels, these reviews became my initial source of research. For the purpose of this essay, I wanted a representative sample of six novels:

- for two age categories (three middle grade, three adult)
- written in different points of view (half in first person, half in third)
- and genres (two contemporary, two historical, two speculative)
- by a (mostly) diverse pool of authors.

To make my final selection, I read the McLuhan page of each novel in my shortlist. I tried to be as representative as possible, but I realize that some may wish to read more examples in a particular age category or genre or read from a larger pool of diverse authors. Since I already did the work of categorization, I share that list here. Please note, this list does not include how each author identifies, since not all authors share that information online. Any identities listed here came directly from the authors' biographies or online profiles I assumed to be self-managed. If I have made an error in identification, or any identities have changed, please notify me so I can make corrections. My current contact information can be found online.

Find the annotated reading list at https://larawillard.com/stareyed.

Appendix 3: Writer's Syntax Toolbox

The toolbox is available at https://larawillard.com/stareyed.

The chart is inspired by Dr. Kathleen Black's Sentence Style Analysis from *Guide for the Advancing Grammarian: An Exploration of English for Writers and Teachers*. Black, who has a Ph.D. in English education, recommends analyzing twenty-five consecutive sentences, omitting dialogue, for a representative sample.

My chart uses the grammatical forms and functions mentioned in my paper and can be used both as a method to analyze style and as a reference for writers. While my chart could serve as a sort of syntax checklist, each form and function is just one item in a writer's toolbox, and some tools will be used rarely, if ever.

If analyzing exemplary style in a work of fiction, I recommend analyzing the McLuhan, climactic, or first pages of the novel—whichever seems best at affecting the reader's experience of a character's emotional state. If troubleshooting one's own work, I recommend analyzing whichever one scene seems most troublesome. (Analyzing more than one scene in a book will seriously delay the writing process and progress.) In a separate tab, I've included my analysis of twenty-five sentences from *As Brave As You*'s McLuhan scene as an example.