

Fish & Wildlife Service – National Conservation Training Center
Critical Writing/Critical Thinking Follow-up Web Series CSP3167OL
Who is Doing What to Whom? Narration as a Revision Strategy
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MB: Today's session is on narration as a revision strategy. And I know that we have all had the experience of being faced with a document, whether we wrote it or someone else wrote it, and we know that there are problems, but when we sit down to revise, all of a sudden, we just want to crumple the whole thing up and throw it away and start over from scratch. So, hopefully today we can look at some strategies that will help you pinpoint where your revisions need to be done, how they can be done most effectively so you don't have to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

In order to do that, there are two documents that are available online at the following link, so you want to make sure that you have cut and pasted that link into your browser, that you have downloaded those documents onto your computer, and that you have printed copies of both of them in front of you today. We will have the examples on a PowerPoint presentation, but as we go back and forth between our PowerPoint and our revision, you're going to want to have those in front of you.

The other thing we'd like to make sure of is that you have either a Word document open on your computer that you can use to revise sentences when we ask you to do that, or you have a sheet of paper in front of you if you prefer to handwrite your revisions. But there will be times during today's session when I ask you to write a revision of the sentence, and then you'll compare it with the sample revision that I have prepared.

So, I don't see any questions. I don't see any raised hands. And I assume that means that we're all ready to go. If I'm wrong, please send me a question or raise your hand, and we'll be happy to get your troubles taken care of just as soon as we can. But we're going to go ahead and begin now.

So, narration as a revision strategy. Some of you may remember this example from the module in our course. This piece of writing is from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and you'll notice about it that in the first sentence, she introduces a shift from inorganic chemicals to carbon molecules, and calls these some of the old material. What happens next in this paragraph, and one of the reasons that it is so easy to read, is because she identifies one of those chemicals, arsenic, and she makes it into the character of the story that she's telling, almost like a fairy. Arsenic, she says, is the basic ingredient in a variety of weed and insect killers. It's highly toxic. Its relations to man are varied and historic. And it has been a favorite agent of homicide from the Borgias to today. It's those two elements—the identification of arsenic as a character in

her story, and aligning arsenic with the subject in all of her sentences—that makes this paragraph so easy to read and so powerful when we read it.

In order to see a break down of how that works, I've created a chart that's I guess a little bit like the old-fashioned sentence diagrams that some of us were forced to do in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade. But that asks a more basic question than the predicate or the subject complement, and that is who is doing what to whom? In each instance, the who is in the subject position of the sentence. The is doing what is in the verb position. And the to whom isn't there, you'll see that many of these are blank, are in the object position. So in Carson's first sentence, the Second World War, and the materials are both marked and persisted in organic chemicals. Doesn't make a whole lot of sense. But that sentence is a transition that introduces the subject of this paragraph. From the second sentence on, we can see a consistent who—arsenic, arsenic, its relation, its compounds. And all of our verbs are specific actions that the arsenic is performing: it is chief among the chemicals; it is still the basic ingredient; it is highly toxic; it is occurring widely; it is varied and historic; it is tasteless; and it is the favorite agent. There is a clear relationship in this paragraph between who and what.

Let's take a look at another good example that Carson has provided for us. If you've got your Word document printed out, this is example B. I know that it's a little bit small and crowded on the PowerPoint presentation. Again, this comes from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, where she begins once again with a setting. For the first time in the history of the world, every human being is now subjected to... And at this point she introduces the subject, the character of the story that she's about to tell, dangerous chemicals, which impact human lives from the moment of conception until death. If you scan through the next four, five, six sentences, you'll see that the subject of every one of them refers back to the chemicals. The synthetic pesticides in sentence two. Sentence three, residues of these chemicals. Sentence four, they. Sentence five, they. Sentence six, these chemicals. And sentence seven, they.

If you look carefully at the verbs in this paragraph, you'll see that many of them are in the passive form. They have been found. Or the vague, they occur. And yet, when the paragraph is read as a whole, it reads actively and it reads engagingly. Again, if we look at the breakdown of the paragraph, we see that it's because there is a consistency between who is doing what to whom. While in the first sentence, we begin with every human being, the object of that sentence is the dangerous chemicals that then becomes the character for the rest of the paragraph. Synthetic pesticides, residues, they, they, these chemicals, and they.

It almost doesn't matter what follows after that since the subject of each of those sentences is so consistent. In most of the examples we're going to look at it today, we will discover that the subjects are not consistent. But we will also discover that there are very simple ways to make them consistent. Simple, not simplistic, and there's a key difference there.

So let's take a look at another example that's good, but not perfect. Those of you who were in our most recent class will remember this as coming from the petition to list the Kauai creeper, or the akikiki. You'll see that in the first sentence of this paragraph, the akikiki forages. In the second it feeds. In the third sentence, we shift from the akikiki to its nesting season. That's such a small shift that our reader can handle that without too much difficulty. In the fourth, few akikiki nests have been found. In the fifth, both sexes help to build the nest. And then in the sixth, there is no information about nest success. On the whole, this paragraph, and I'm going to switch us again to our diagram to show how it is working, provides us with a consistent set of answers to our question. Who, the akikiki, is doing what, foraging, feeding, extending, indicating, and the to whom. The only place or places where that pattern breaks down are in sentence five, where incubation is observed. And in sentence six with the vague "there is."

In this paragraph, what we see is that the majority of the sentences are doing their job. They're clear, and readers can understand them. But there are two sentences: this little clause in sentence five, and all of sentence six, that are inconsistent with the rest of the paragraph. Now, we have pinpointed our area for revision, and by asking ourselves the question, who is doing what to whom, we should be able to answer that revision, excuse me, to revise the paragraph. So, in sentence five, incubation has been observed by the female only. Our character is right here in the word female. What we'd like to do is put her in the subject position. We can do that just like this.

The original sentence reads: both sexes help build the nest and feed the nestlings, but incubation has been observed by the female only. We can change that easily to say, only the female has been observed incubating. Not only does the sentence read clearer, it's also more accurate, because now we know that the female is not the one observing the incubation, but also doing the incubation.

We can use the same strategy to correct our subject and verb in sentence six. Language referring to the reproductive rates, the nest success, the survival of adults or juveniles is all language about the character of the akikiki. If we can put that into the subject position, we can greatly improve the readability of this paragraph. So instead of, there is no information about, let's put those at the beginning. Nest success, reproductive rates, survival of adults or juveniles, or movements lack documentation.

Now you may recall that during our week we talked a little bit about emphasis, and the language "lack documentation" at the end of our paragraph does seem a little bit weak. We may want to change that paragraph, excuse me, that sentence, to read, we lack information about. That character we is not the akikiki, but it's still a human being and far more interesting than the word there. So if we're worried about emphasis, we should use the second of the two revisions here.

At this point, I'd like to see if anybody has any questions. If you do, would you raise your hand?

Alright. I don't see any hands raised, so I'm guessing that you folks are ready to try this on your own. Let's take a look at paragraph D. Paragraph D is all about prairie dogs, prairie dogs and their breeding seasons. So we've got information here about the females having litters, about when breeding occurs, evidence of nesting and burrows. So I'd like you to take a look at this paragraph and see if there are any sentences that don't belong. Do you see language referring to the prairie dogs and their nesting or breeding habits at the beginning or close to the beginning of each of these sentences? If not, which sentences have difficulty?

And if anyone has a suggestion, please go ahead and send it through the chat feature. Nobody's raised their hand yet, so either we're having difficulty using the chat feature, or we don't see any problems with the paragraph. I'm trying to set up a poll, but unfortunately I'm not quite quick enough to get that out to you. Alright.

I'm going to take us back then to the diagram to take a look at how the paragraph is working. We see that in sentence one, and if you'd like to refer to the paragraph, remember that you have it on your Word handout. Prairie dogs begin. There's our character, and the action is clear. In the second sentence, females referring to the prairie dogs again. In the third sentence, breeding and juveniles. So far, so good. No evidence of nests. Again, we're still okay, but take a look at sentence five. Recent studies have found. That starts off a little bit rough, but it follows up with natal burrows, so it's actually okay. There are times, because you are scientists, when you need to give credit for ideas and information, and this is the right way to do it. Remember in the Carson example, she too brings up the question of scientists, but she has her characters in the sentence, either in a clause like this, or in the object.

But look what happens in sentence six. Ricketts, et al provide information. All of a sudden, our prairie dogs and their nesting habits have disappeared completely. So we need to flag sentence six as a problem area. Sentence seven, females were observed. That's fine. But sentence eight, fine grasses, shredded sagebrush bark. It may be immediately obvious to a biologist that those are nesting components. But if you're writing to a non-biology audience, they may not know that, so sentence eight also needs to be flagged, because the language in the subject position doesn't clearly or immediately relate to the prairie dogs or their nesting habits. Finally, sentence nine is structured very much like sentence five. Sidney found that female prairie dogs construct. As long as we've got that follow up, we're okay.

So in this whole paragraph, which we might have been tempted to completely rewrite, we've identified two sentences that need work. Sentence six, Ricketts provide, and sentence eight, fine grasses, etc. Now is when I'd like you to try your revision. So at this point I'm going to ask that you switch over to a Word document, or you can work by hand. I'd like you to concentrate on those two sentences. Sentence six, Ricketts et al.

First, discover the language in that sentence that refers to prairie dogs or their nesting habits. And second, try to put that language in the subject position. I'm going to give you two minutes to do that. When you're done, please put a green checkmark next to

your name so that we know you're ready to move on. If you're listening to a recorded version of today's webinar, now would be a good time to press pause.

Well I am seeing an awful lot of green checkmarks. Alright, so here's your second challenge. What about sentence eight? Fine grasses, shredded sagebrush bark, and hair were the primary components used in the nesting material. Can you flip that sentence around so that the nesting material gets placed in the subject position? At this point I'm going to clear all your great little green checkmarks, and once you're finished with sentence eight, give me another green checkmark so I know when everybody's ready to move on.

Alright, you guys must be my graduate class, cause you got done really fast! Let's take a look if you got the same answers that I came up with, and remember this is writing, so there are very few rights and wrongs, just lots of very good ideas. Alright, so for the Ricketts sentence, we could change that around to say, Information on 7 natal burrows found in Sirdaugh Valley Michigan is provided by Ricketts et al. What I want you to notice about this sentence is we got those 7 natal burrows close to the subject position. We still have that word information in there, but I think most readers are going to judge that as more clear and more consistent in the rest of the sentence. The last one I think was a little bit easy. Nesting material was composed mainly of fine grasses, shredded sagebrush bark and hair. Hopefully you got something close to that in your own revision.

Remember, the key is to get language about prairie dogs, their breeding or nesting habits in the subject position close to the beginning of the sentence.

Let's try another example, paragraph E. I'll give you a few minutes to read through. What I hope you're able to see is that the first sentence references the petition, and then the species. The second sentence shifts to the threats to the species. And the third sentence shifts to an organization that is trying to protect the species. Definitely, this is a paragraph with some problems. So, how do we identify those? Let's take a look.

Our diagram shows us that we've moved from this species to predation, disease, and habitat loss and degradation, to the IUCN, and back to the species. We have a few different options in this paragraph. What we need to do is identify a consistent character throughout. We could choose the akikiki as our character. We could choose the threats to that species, or we could choose the different organizations that are trying to protect it. Because this is a petition that the service has been asked to make a decision on, it may be a little dangerous for us to choose the organizations, because we might end up being one of those, and at this point it's too early in our context for us to say whether we're going to help or not, so that's probably not the best choice.

While we all love the species that we work with and try to protect, there are so many threats and so many other things going on with this species that that too might create some complications. Still, the threats themselves are so many that as you can see from

sentence two, trying to pack them all into the subject position is a little bit awkward. So among our three choices, the species itself is probably the best option. Let's take another look at the paragraph. According to the petition, this species occurs. If we're going to make the akikiki into the character of our whole paragraph, then we need to leave that sentence alone. Sentence two needs to move the akikiki to the beginning of the sentence. And sentence three needs to move the akikiki to the beginning of the sentence. Again, on your Word document or by hand, I'm going to give you this time three minutes to do two sentences. And again, if you would give me your green checkmark when you're done.

Some of our participants are done already! We have such fast students today! Let's take a look and see if you got the same answers that I got. For sentence two, primary threats to the akikiki, including predation, disease, and habitat loss, are all derived from the introduction of invasive alien species. And, sentence three, the akikiki has been categorized as critically endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. Hopefully you got something close that put the species in the subject position close to the beginning of the sentence.

Alright, we're going to try one more example with the akikiki, just because it's lots of fun to say. Example F. Again, another instance where we're switching rapidly from the species to in sentence two one of the threats, encroachment from invasive plant species. Sentence three switches to even more threats, including the uprooting of native vegetation, but then also predation. Now, that's potentially a pretty big problem with this paragraph, because if you look at the first sentence, only the habitat loss has been identified as a topic for this paragraph. Sentence three not only switches characters, but it also introduces a new topic and it causes the paragraph to lose its focus. In sentence four, the reader doesn't have much of an idea whether the hurricanes and storms are going to threaten the native habitat and the vegetation, or, as the sentence turns out that they're going to increase the spread of mosquito-borne disease, a different threat than the one identified in the topic sentence to the paragraph.

This paragraph instead of reading like a fairytale or a children's story reads a little bit more like a mystery, and we definitely don't want to be writing mystery novels for our readers. So, once again, the diagram shows us that we've moved from the Kauai creeper to encroachment to other threats to the onset of climate change. Let's try to find a consistent character that could embody all of those.

In this case, I'm going to suggest that we focus on the threats to the species, specifically habitat loss and predation, or more broadly speaking threats by other species, that would include both predation and the mosquito-borne diseases. So this is a little bit more complicated revision than what you did before, but the principle is the same. We want the threats from either the degradation of habitat or other species to be in the subject or the character position. So if we take a look at our sample, we see that the first sentence we need to add language referring to predation and mosquito-borne disease. In the second sentence, we need to put the native habitat and vegetation in the subject position. In the third sentence, we need to put the non-native mammalian species in the

subject position. And in the fourth sentence, we need to put the mosquito-born disease in the subject position.

Let's walk through that again, step by step. Sentence number one needs to have the predation and disease threats added. The Kauai creeper or akikiki primarily suffers from habitat loss or degradation as well as from predation and disease. Now, those of you who are reading closely will notice that I changed our little pet peeve and/or to very simply or, because as we spell out in the paragraph, in some places habitat is being lost, and in other places habitat is simply degrading. The effect on the akikiki is the same regardless. So this is a little bit stronger and a little bit less bureaucratic.

Now, it's your turn to try sentence two. Let's get the habitat in the subject position. Take a minute and give that a try.

Alright folks, looks like we're all done with sentence number two. Take a look and see if you got something similar to this: native habitat and vegetations have been reduced by encroachment from invasive plant species. If you did, give sentence three a try, and again, try to put the native vegetation in the subject position. Sentence three is a little bit trickier, because it also includes predation. Remember that we want to hide the threat, so the non-mam..., excuse me, the non-native mammalian species that are preying on the akikiki should be the subject of the second half of sentence number three. Give that one a try, and give me a green checkmark when you're done.

This one is a little bit tougher, isn't it? Part of the problem is this phrase, along with predation. For such a threat, this seems like a weak, watered down phrase. Let's take a look at the sample revision here: native vegetation has been uprooted by feral hogs and non-native mammalian species prey on the bird. You'll notice that we had to add the object at the end of the sentence. That's a good thing. We want the akikiki to be a part of our petition the whole way through. Also, we had to add a stronger transition. It's shorter, and, instead of along with, but the fact that it creates an independent clause, or a complete sentence at the end, gives an umph to it that it didn't have before.

Alright folks, one more time. Sentence number four in this paragraph still needs to be revised as well. I'm going to take us back to the original, and give us all two minutes. Once again, please give me the green checkmark when you've got the threat in the subject position to sentence four.

Thirty more seconds.

Alright then. So did you figure out the real threat. If you remember our cause and effect module, you'll realize that climate change is a third tier cause. The hurricanes and the storms are a second tier. The real threat to the akikiki are the mosquito-born disease, and so those are what we want to have at the very beginning of our sentence. Mosquito-born disease has been introduced and spread by hurricanes and storms intensified by the onset of climate change. Hopefully, you have something similar to this.

The next example that's on the PowerPoint presentation and that's on your Word document, we're going to skip through in the interests of time, because I'm sure at this point, you're tired of thinking about Hawaii, especially if your day is as grey and rainy as what we have here. So we're going to move on to example H.

Example H is from, I believe, a response to a petition which suggested that a certain stream was in danger and that some of the fish in that stream had been harmed because of local development activity. The paragraph begins with an assessment of how harm can be identified by the service. Let's take a look. The subject of our first sentence is "the regulation," the object of our sentence is the injury or death of a listed species. As we saw in the Rachel Carson example, then, the object of the first sentence becomes the character of the second. Injury may be shown. But in the third sentence the kinds of studies or tests that we can use to demonstrate injury become the subject of the sentence, and the injury itself is lost. In the fourth sentence, the injury is disguised with this language, the effect of an activity, a vague reference to possible harm. And in the fifth sentence, the introduction of toxic chemicals, a possible cause of the injury or death of the listed species, becomes the subject of the sentence. There's a very vague kind of consistency between all three or four of these sentences, but the key language, injury, death, or harm is not included in the subject position of each of these, and that's one of the reasons why this paragraph reads a little bit unclear.

If we take a look at our analysis, we see that we've moved from regulation to injury to field surveys to effect to introduction of toxic chemicals. And what we also see is a series of passive and vague verbs. May be shown, might be used, might be measurable, or can be evaluated. If we make language referring to injury or death into the subject of all of our sentences, we run the risk of overstating the case or of misstating the regulations. For example, in sentence three, field surveys and assessments, population studies, or laboratory studies. Those can all be used to determine the outcome of a specific activity or series of activities and whether or not the injury or death of a listed species has occurred. That's a very long, complicated bit of information to have to keep including in every single sentence.

What we discover when we look at the characters in this paragraph is that we're actually missing just a few key words that would clear up all of our confusion. Between sentence two and three, we just need a simple transition. Such as. Injury is now the subject of our sentence, and these kinds of tests become the examples of how we can demonstrate injury. There's a similar relationship at the end of the paragraph. The introduction of toxic chemicals is one of the possible causes of the injury or death of a listed species. By making that clear, for example, we've clarified the relationship of this character to the rest of the paragraph.

The examples that we looked at previously in today's discussion had us actually switch our sentences around so that the character was placed in the subject position, but we studied throughout the week of our class a variety of relationships such as cause and effect, example and analogy, or description. If we can add transitions like these that

clarify the relationships between our characters and what we've chosen as the subject of our sentence, then we don't always have to keep repeating language like "the species" or "the threat", and that helps us to avoid simple writing, or simplistic writing.

One last example that we'll work with today. Here in paragraph 1, I believe this is the last example on your Word handout. It's a discussion of the sedimentation patterns that were studied by the Monitoring Study Group. And what I'd like you to do on your own is identify which sentences need work. You've got three choices here. One, two, three, or any combination of those. When you've got the answer, send me a chat message letting me know which numbers, which sentences, need to be revised.

Kalani suggests that sentence two needs to be revised, and so does Ann-Marie. Can I see some checkmarks for those of you who agree, sentence two could use some revision? Good, Alan and Jennifer both agree with that. What about sentence number three, mass landslides and other failures? If the sedimentation analysis is our character, is there any language in sentence three that refers to the sediment. Yes or no. Green checkmark for yes; red x for no. Is there language in sentence three that refers to sediment? Alan, Jennifer, you've got it right. The highest sediment delivery, right? So sentence two and sentence three could use a little bit of work to get the sedimentation at the beginning of the sentence instead of the end.

Your last chance today to do a little bit of writing for your own benefit instead of for somebody else's. Take a minute on your Word document or by hand and revise sentence two and sentence three to move sedimentation to the beginning or the subject position. You have three minutes.

You have one minute left.

And like it or not, our time for today is almost up. Let's take a look at our last two examples. Sentence number two could be rewritten to say, they demonstrated that the largest contributors to sedimentation of fish bearing streams include timber harvest roads and their associated watercourse crossings. Very simply flipping the object and the subject here. And then, the highest sediment delivery to streams was produced by mass landslides and other failures typically related to road building and other maintenance activities. The phrase, compared to other erosion processes, I placed in brackets because depending on your emphasis that can go at either the beginning or the end of the sentence. That decision needs to be made in the context of the larger paragraph.

Well folks, I hope that you enjoyed today's session on narration as a revision strategy. I hope that it was a good refresher for you of what we had in the course, and I hope also that you got some good practice in from doing this. If there's anything that I can help you with, feel free to send me an email message at baker@shepherd.edu. I'm always happy to hear from our course participants. We'd also like to remind you that we hold our webinar series on the third Thursday of every month, so be sure to block that time

off of your calendar, and to sign up for next month. We look forward to seeing you all again. Have a great afternoon everybody. Talk to you later, bye.

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