

IMPROSEMENT

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Beginning and beginning: writing is always (all ways) be(com)ing and be(ginn)ing in the wor(l)d. Once upon a time, she thought she'd write a beautiful book. She thought she was writing about here for (t)here. She thought/thinks almost everything was/is a possibility in writing. Here includes her as does hear which includes ear. She includes he as do the and thee. Letters and words are presents/present presences. Sentences: shapes or structures that depend on who the writer is and how she feels when she writes which depends on how much she loves sentences and what she's been doing with them recently.

Recently, she's been marking finals and critical essays. She doesn't ever think of writing a beautiful book or beginning a story. She marks down her time to keep her going. When she notices she's too slow, she walks the dog or washes the car so, when she returns, she can grade more quickly. She looks forward to minor amusements such as the student who wrote improsement meaning imprisonment and the one who wrote thoughts instead of those, but she had added a t for thoughts before she reread his sentence. One student, trying to get the title of an Ondaatje poem, wrote cinanum, cinimen, cannamen, cinnimen, cinniman, cinnamin. Another wrote, this exert from *In the Skin of a Lion* focuses on the work force.

Exert force. Another said of bpNichol, he's talking about politics in general, that people must react, be aggressive, make changes, rather than stand back and watch as passifiers do. She imagined the whole Peace March, which was marching through Vancouver as she read that, sucking plastic pacifiers and thought, this student has no idea that pacifists make active choices.

Three years ago, she was in a composition class trying to explain, as one of her students put it, the mysteries of the semicolon. She was joking away about independent and dependent clauses when a young man near the window said, I don't understand—what does the first cause have to do with the second? She looked over his shoulder and saw a male teacher walking towards what was supposed to be a temporary building named P. I'm glad I didn't sleep with you then, she thought. Oh no, she said laughing lightly, you're thinking of cause, but I mean (in a very teacherly voice) clause.

A clause has a subject and a verb that might be surrounded by a number of other words but can, without these words, if it is independent, stand alone and make sense. Birds sing. Jack jumps. Jill wins. Each of those is a bare sentence with a subject—birds, Jack, Jill—and a verb. Each stands alone. Each is also an independent or main or principal clause. But look what happens if we add a word that makes them dependent or subordinate: when birds sing, if Jack jumps, because Jill wins. They don't stand alone anymore. Jack jumps over the candlestick—that stands alone and is what type of clause? Independent. Right. When Jack jumped over the candlestick—does that stand alone? No. Right. It's what now? Dependent. Right. While, because, since, which, that, who, when, where, after, if—all sorts of words make independent clauses dependent or what is sometimes called subordinate. Excuse me, said a student, why can't they just give one name to these things? Because there isn't really a they, she said; I know it would be easier if all teachers used the same terminology, but we don't.

When the class was over, she went to her office. She thought about the teacher she had seen and how, in the context of a class, she hadn't missed a beat, but she had thought of that one night several years ago when she went out with him and how horrible she felt when he kissed her. He was between his first and second marriages then; she was still recovering from her first. He reminded her too much of her ex-husband or, given the fact that she had

truly enjoyed the evening, she was afraid because when she relaxed she wanted what was over and wasn't ready to begin again. Displaced loyalties. An urgent kiss. A pushing away. Nothing soft. A desperation. She wanted a man, but not that man. He wanted a woman, almost any woman. Maybe not. Maybe he really wanted her then. She'd never know. Just another mystery with a semicolon.

Within days, he visited her in her office. Semicolon. His second marriage was over. Semicolon. They talked. Semicolon. Can we talk again? Same time next week, she said. (One of the few things she hates about her work is how long it takes to arrange meetings of any sort, so if two people are available one week at a particular time then...) The next work day, he came to her office door and said, what I really meant was, if I asked you out, would you go out with me? He was standing in the open doorway. She was sitting at her desk. Independent. In minutes, she was going to see the man she was then seeing but who was pissing her off with his self-centredness as much as she loved his particular use of language, e.g. the lower intestines of Burnaby. Yes, yes I would.

Within weeks, she and he were in bed together. But we're so different, she'd say. They were different. They are different. They are also different than they were then different—then, back then, and then, three years ago. She discovered that he only kisses when he wants to make love. She loves making love, but she also likes to kiss kiss not butterfly kiss at other times. Compromise contains promise. Promise contains prose. Prose contains most of the letters of poetry, but means to turn forward, straightforward, the ordinary language of men in speaking and writing. To her, the turning forward is more the essence than the straightness (or men). To her, a sentence both improves and opens possibilities.

She loves turning, crookedness, circles, flexibility. Ability. The form of a sentence is so elastic that when she is not teaching others how to write sentences that are supposed to be straightforward she thinks she can do almost anything she wants within the confines of its structure. Sentences do make sense of the world. Ondaatje wrote *In the Skin of a Lion* in structures which, one of her students delighted in pointing out, are sometimes fragments, are sometimes run-on sentences, contain comma-splices, etc. But, but, she said. Laurence uses fragments too, and there aren't any quotation marks,

and she uses you when she doesn't mean the reader. Yet, yet, she said. Wah wrote whole paragraphs without punctuation in *Waiting for Saskatchewan*. Yes, she said. Wah's paragraphs cohere. Laurence's lack of quotation marks makes sense. Ondaatje's lines are written in the cleanest way they could possibly be. Naked prose. Speech rhythms. Everything fits. They begin and end in exactly the right place. What more is there?

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