

Review: *Between the Commas: Sentence Instruction That Builds Confident Writers (and Writing Teachers)* by Martin Brandt

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Between the Commas: Sentence Instruction That Builds Confident Writers (and Writing Teachers) is Martin Brandt's first book. He has spent over two decades in the classroom, has worked with the San Jose Area Writing Project, and is a winner of the California Teachers of English Award for Classroom Excellence.

Brandt's main thesis in the book is that too often, teachers don't give enough time to the fundamentals of writing. He argues that most of the training teachers receive is on how to teach literature. Brandt admits to falling into this pattern as well, and recognizes that for most of his early career, he asked students to simply write things in the hope that the act of doing the work would produce better results.

As a high school teacher, Brandt's audience is mainly others like him at the secondary level. While his methods would transfer up or down a few grade levels, his activities and methods are ideal for the Junior and Senior level students he uses as examples throughout his book.

Brandt's focus is to share ideas about active sentence construction; however, this is not a grammar book. Brandt acknowledges that direct grammar instruction is not a particularly effective method, noting that "We all acquire an entire sophisticated system of grammar by the time we're about four years old, without the aid of a single diagram or worksheet" (xxiii). Instead, Brandt focuses on the sentence. He relies partially on a student's innate sense of the musicality and flow of language, but also pushes them

toward a deep dive into their own sentences in order to elevate their language and develop clarity.

Teachers looking for an entirely new approach to teaching sentence structure won't find much to add in Brandt's book that completely breaks the mold. However, what he does do is package sentence analysis into a new and more modernized language that teenagers are more likely to recognize. This reason alone is enough to test his methods. Brandt's recognition of his students' knowledge of language provides the backbone for his instruction, and his activities and encouragement to play with language make this book an interesting new guide to help students navigate the sometimes choppy waters of mature writing. His activities aren't so much new lessons as they are ways to make students internalize the music of sentences that they might already be aware of.

Brandt breaks his brand of sentence instruction into three pillars: Sentence Focus, Sentence Development, and Sentence Coherence.

Brandt's initial attention to Sentence Focus is the part where he asks students to home in on each sentence's main point. Here, he argues that many students have trouble composing sentences that have direction. These are the sentences that cause teachers to scribble "awk" in the margins. Brandt makes an effort to compare speech patterns to writing patterns and looks to this natural part of language development for help. Part of his argument is that when students move from personal writing to academic writing, they lose some of that natural ability. Brandt provides some sentence imitation activities here, which ask students to write translations of difficult passages. Only then, he argues, can students begin to break down their own sentences. He offers up other activities dealing with concrete and abstract nouns in this section, again tying the lessons to a student's ability to recognize the focus of the sentence and how that translates to a reader's expectation. Students must know their sentence's subject. Then a teacher can

“have a discussion with them rooted not in seemingly arbitrary errors (*fragment*, for example) but in the far more crucial understanding of reader expectation” (23).

The second section of the book is called Sentence Development. Here, Brandt makes a solid argument that most students in grades six and above are ready to tackle the construction of complex sentences. Part of his argument is that it is okay to let a few grammatical mistakes be part of the process, and he supports that suggestion by comparing it to learning how to ride a bike. You’ll fall, yes, but that does not stop the process.

What Brandt calls Sentence Development looks a lot like old-fashioned sentence combining. He knows this and initiates it in his classroom with a variety of worksheets. (These are displayed in the book and can also be accessed through a Heinemann account.) Brandt cites a number of older studies that support the efficacy of sentence combining.

However, Brandt also puts his own spin on what he has students do. This is where his names like Dime-Dropper and Smack-Talker are introduced. These are his names for adjective clauses and noun phrase appositives. He recognizes the oddity in the names, but lets us off the hook by saying, “I am not suggesting that you adopt my bizarre nomenclature” (40).

Here, he offers up a number of “sentence scrambles” to push students toward recognizing what is possible when a long sentence is organized correctly. It is easy to see what Brandt is doing here. He is putting the musical nature of language into students’ heads and forcing them to recognize that written language has musicality much like spoken language does.

He clarifies his reasoning saying, “I’m trying to get them to do on purpose in their writing something that already comes naturally to them in speech. If they do this, their

writing may begin to more closely approach their rich and often delightful speech habits” (42).

Another outcome that Brandt points to is the development of writers who begin to take on more of an authoritative role. Brandt’s Not-But activity seems to achieve this purpose most of all. When students write sentences like “I had hoped not to debate this issue further, but to resolve it once and for all” it makes them appear more in control of the topic.

True grammarians will love the deep dive that Brandt takes in this section, but it does come with a warning from him. He acknowledges that many students will struggle here, and cautions against moving quickly into technical discussions.

Brandt’s final pillar of writing instruction is Sentence Coherence. This, he argues, is where it all comes together and students become not only mature writers, but mature thinkers. The first two sections refine the raw material of language, and Brandt’s third section attempts to lay them all out in the proper order. Moving away, somewhat, from the more technical aspects of writing, Brandt points out that good writing means good thinking, and that his writing assignments are a way of making students think through a concept. Coherent sentences make this possible.

This is largely a question of reader expectation. Brandt laments, as all English teachers do, about the utter lack of order in some students’ essays. Even if the sentences are good, it all falls apart if a sense of connection between those sentences is lost.

Brandt summarizes this succinctly on page 105 when he writes “But young writers unfamiliar with other conventions of written discourse, or unaware of the expectations that their sentences create, often stall after a couple of sentences--not because they lack imagination, but because they have yet to internalize the needs of their audience.”

To create that awareness, Brandt provides a map of sorts to organize a paragraph. A

student could begin with any sentence (thesis, topic sentence) and work through his suggested questions to produce a more readable sequence. Some of these questions are: Can you tell me what you mean? Can you explain what you don't mean? Can you define your terms? Can you address the implications?

In this section, Brandt explains how each of his questions fit together to make a decent argument. He provides examples from student writing to illustrate his point and offers up some mistakes that he has seen students run into.

Since part of his position is that referencing the text is what needs to be done, he has also incorporated a number of his activities into the book to show how his previous sentence combining skills can be fine-tuned to become vehicles to include quotes from the text.

In the final section of the book, *Sentence Instruction at Work*, Brandt briefly shows us how it all comes together in his classes. This is the shortest section in the book and references some of the essay assignments he gives to students, complete with the graphic organizers he provides. Since Brandt's book is not about full essays, it's hardly a fault to touch on this only briefly. He provides a nice context and wrap-up to show how his brand of sentence instruction takes full form at the end of an academic unit or as a semester exam. His lessons are still evident, although there is the sense that the trees of the individual sentences are the more important building blocks to create the forest of the essay. And maybe they should be.

This is, after all, Brandt's goal. To help students write better sentences. And after a year's worth of step-by-step instruction, putting it all together in an essay should be second nature.

Even here, Brandt's penchant for clever names is evident. He calls one of his final essays "The Big However." It's a five-paragraph essay, yes, but the structure calls into play

more of an argument, and his description focuses less on the traditional essay structure and more on allowing students to explore ideas. The format could fit a variety of arguments, but Brandt's specific example is a sort of movie analysis/philosophical argument about theme. The "However" in this model "takes its name from that crucial moment when, after acknowledging the appeal of the other side, a writer drops in The Big However to signal a return to the thesis" (136).

Overall, Brandt's book comes off as a good instructional model for helping students write better sentences. There's a strong "real-life sentence diagramming" feel to it that even people with sentence diagramming trauma might appreciate. His activities feel like grammar instruction, but they feel even more like an analysis of good writing, and seem to find a comfortable spot between practicality and "drill and kill." *Between the Commas* provides quality ideas that are adaptable to many classrooms and push kids toward thinking more deeply about the words they choose.