FLOW: Ways to Speed and Smooth

Freighting

Telescoping

Netting

Before we get to preschool we know how to say, “He throws the ball,” and by the time we get out of first grade we can write, maybe with misspellings, “He throws the ball.” But by first grade we can say so much more than we can write: “Bill, the guy who is always getting me in trouble and never listens to the teacher—but she always says ‘He’s trying,’—and John, the guy who fed the rat to Kurt, the python at school, both got sick and started throwing up all over the floor, the desks, and Mr. Skumawitz, the new principal everyone calls Skoomie.” In his early years of teaching, Gary realized that even as adults we are afraid to write such long sentences and that until students were able to, they would never have the control and language scope available to professional writers. We both know that length-stunting stems from years of students being taught to shorten their sentences by English teachers weary from correcting length-related entanglements. Out of painful necessity, length-stunting became part of English instruction dogma.

The truth is, the sentence about Bill and John needs to be long. We make it long when we speak because we know that the characters, actions, and sub-thoughts work together to create a reality that is as exhausting and fraught with sideshows as the actual event was when it happened. The sentence’s length smooths reality’s flow, allowing the sentence to capture the intertwined mini experiences that together create an elongated reality. If the sentence were to be shattered into smaller sentences, the reality of the experience would be compromised, if not totally lost.

Following are three methods that smooth the flow: Freighting, Telescoping, and Netting. Strong writers use all these methods to different degrees, and you will finally combine all of them to create infinite varieties of flow, resulting in different voices that serve a multitude of purposes.

Freighting

Freighting involves thinking of the parts of a simple sentence as flat-bed freight cars, each one capable of having more similar material piled vertically on top of it. This material is then snapped onto the top of its appropriate freight load with commas. For instance, in the simple sentence “Bill chewed a red apple,” there are essentially four freight cars: “Bill,” “chewed,” “red,” and “apple.” Freighting requires the writer to take a more careful look at the reality the sentence describes and decide what other details belong in the sentence’s flow.

Loading.

For example, one needs to ask whether anyone other than Bill chewed the apple. If so, they are snapped on top of the “Bill” car:

Bill, my aunt Tina, and all their cronies chewed a red apple.

Next, one looks closely at reality and decides if the apple was only chewed or whether it met another fate at the characters’ hands. These actions get snapped onto the “chew” freight car:

Bill, my aunt Tina, and all their cronies, chopped, chewed, and pulverized the red apple.

Never stop observing. Maybe the apples were not just red, and maybe more than apples filled the food trough. Using commas, snap more material on top of the “red” and “apple” cars. The final freight train could look like this:

Bill, my aunt Tina, and all their cronies, chopped, chewed, and
utterly pulverized the red, hard, juicy, candied apple, and the mud-brown, crumbling cookies, scatter-shot with chocolate chips.

Phrases attached to the main sentence may also be viewed as freight cars. For example, if the sentence above read “While opening the door, Bill chewed a red apple,” it might eventually read like this:

While opening the door, tip-toeing across the threshold, and throwing himself at his boss’s mercy, Bill chewed a red apple.

Realize too, that your piled up items do not need to be one word entries but can be phrases, adding even more information to the flow. For instance, “Bill, who you can count on to sniff out the best groceries, my aunt Tina, who is a freeloader, and all their cronies” may weigh in as,

Bill, who you can count on to sniff out the best groceries, my aunt Tina, who is a freeloader, and all their cronies, who show up only when the larder is full . . .

Kinks.
We have found that flow gets kinked when students forget which freight-car is getting stacked. Freight-car is not an excuse to language scribble in a million directions. Remember, all the items on the subject car must stay together and then together share all the words on the verb car. If items from different cars are spread all over the flow, each subject taking its own verb off the freight car, there is a risk of creating run-on sentences or comma splices: “Bill chewed the apple, Aunt Tina pulverized the red apple.” Bill and Aunt Tina must both stay together and share the freight car while “chewed” and “pulverized” stay together on theirs: “Bill and Aunt Tina chewed and pulverized the red apple.”

Connecting.
Much more can be added to all the above “apple” sentences. Sentence trains can be switched onto a second track which has its own train and, if the two tracks are closely related in idea, they can be bolted together with connecting words such as “and,” “but,” “or,” “besides,” “because,” and many others, including the semicolon (;) that can be used with or replace some of these connectors. (See the Pause unit on Hieroglyphics.) The final result could read like the following:

While opening the door, tip-toeing across the threshold, and throwing themselves at his boss’s mercy, Bill, who you can

count on to sniff out the best groceries, my aunt Tina who is a freeloader, and all their cronies, who show up only when the larder is full, chopped, chewed, and utterly pulverized the red, hard, juicy, candied apple, and the mud brown, crumbling cookies, scatter-shot with chocolate chips, but this apple event is not worth developing any further, even if it makes for a telling, graphic example of a point that could result in my writing a sentence that goes on for a page but says absolutely nothing of crucial importance.

**English teacherese.**
If an academician questions your frightening sentence or if you need a grammar-proof description to dazzle your English teacher, here is an answer: You have written a complex sentence that many English teachers consider to be too long, complicated, and difficult to grade but that strong writers use all the time. The sentences are grammatically correct, containing multiple subjects, and/or verbs, and/or objects (direct or indirect), where each of the multiple subjects or objects is expanded with either a relative adverb clause (where, when, why) or relative pronoun clause (who, whose, whom, that, which), participle phrase (the boy eating butter), and/or prepositional phrase (in, under, above the house), and/or the verbs are expanded with an adverbial clause (after dinner). The sentences sometimes use either a subordinating conjunction—usually adverbial (where, when, because)—or a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, so) to connect with another independent clause that could be expanded like the first part of the sentence.

**Scope.**
The taxi went up the hill, passed the light square, then on into the dark, still climbing, then leveled out onto a dark street behind St. Etienne du Mont, went smoothly down the asphalt, passed the tree and standing bus at the Place de la Contrascarpe, then turned onto the cobbles of the Rue Mouffetard. (Ernest Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises)

So with this reader [my mother] in mind—and in fact she did read my early drafts—I began to write stories using all the Englishes I grew up with: the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as “simple”; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described
female spiders in order to attract wandering males, some flamed redly in the light of noon or twinkled modestly in the meadow grasses. (Loren Eiseley, “How Flowers Changed the World,” The Immense Journey)

I fought migraine then, ignored the warnings it sent, went to school and after to work in spite of it, sat through lectures in Middle English and presentations to advertisers with involuntary tears running down the right side of my face, threw up in washrooms, stumbled home by instinct, emptied ice trays onto my bed and tried to freeze the pain in my right temple, wished only for a neurosurgeon who would do a lobotomy on house call, and cursed my imagination. (Joan Didion, The White Album)

So descended the Lem, weird unwieldy flying machine, vehicle on stilts and never before landed, craft with a range of shifting velocities more than comparable to the difference from a racing car down to an amphibious duck, a vehicle with huge variations in speed and handling as it slowed, a vehicle to be flown for the first time in the rapidly changing field of gravity, and one-sixth gravity had never been experienced before in anything but the crudest simulations, and mascons beneath, their location unknown, their effect on moon gravity considerable, angles of vision altering all the time and never near to perfect, the weight of the vehicle reducing drastically as the fuel was consumed, and with it all, the computer guiding them, allowing them to feel all the confidence a one-eyed man can put in a blind man going down a dark alley, and when, at the moment they would take over themselves to fly it manually, a range of choices already tried in simulation but never in reality would be open between full manual and full computer. (Norman Mailer, Of a Fire on the Moon)

Thomas Jefferson is definitely the most interesting person to ever set forth on this earth, completing what would seem impossible for one man to do in a lifetime, including abolishing slave trade in Virginia; advocating the decimal monetary system; organizing the Northwest Territory; purchasing the Louisiana territory; officiating as the First Secretary of the State, Second Vice President, and the President of the American Philosophical Society; designing the Virginia State Capitol, University of Virginia, part of the design for Washington D.C., and his home Monticello; however,
the three achievements that he himself valued most highly, which he directed to be inscribed on his tombstone, stand out the most: Author of the Declaration of America Independence, author of the Statue of Virginia Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia. (Bill Singer, student)

Then she looked around the Salon and made the encompassing shrug-and-pout-and-flex-your-hands-from-the-wrist French gesture that in that context meant that the apparent absurdity of the act of fanning yourself in the cold is no more absurd than the whole enterprise of traveling to Paris to look at clothes that you will never wear, displayed on models to whom you bear no resemblance, in order to help a designer get people who will never attend shows like this to someday buy a perfume or a scarf that will give them the consoling illusion that they have a vague association with the kind of people who do attend shows like this — even though the people who attend shows like this are the kind who fan themselves against July heat that happens not to exist. (Adam Gopnik, “Couture Shock,” The New Yorker)

**Telescoping**

Telescoping is another flow technique that demands that the writer view reality more closely. Although Gary devised this flow method especially for film and visual arts students to carefully examine a visual scene, Telescoping is also a structure for zooming through the intricacies of an intellectual concept. Telescoping differs from Freighting in that there is no vertical piling up of material. The initial observation in the form of a sentence is left alone. The period at the end of that sentence is replaced by a comma which acts like a zoom lens to start the telescoping. Instead of imagining freight cars, your mind’s eye acts as if it were a camera with an attached telephoto lens.

**Zooming.**

Consider the following simple sentence about an architectural experience we both enjoyed:

We toured the Hollyhock house.

Instead of adding more cargo to the sentence’s freight cars, the sentence is left alone—no more people are added to the subject “we,” no more actions are added to the verb “tour,” and no more objects were toured beside the “Hollyhock house.” Next the writer replaces the period after “house” with a comma, the comma representing a telephoto lens zooming up closer to any detail on any of the items in the original sentence, which could be “we,” “tour,” or the “Hollyhock house.” If the writer decides to zoom up to the house itself, the sentence could now read:

We toured the Hollyhock house, the walls composed of many prefabricated, cement blocks.

The period at the end of this two-part sentence may also be replaced with a comma, but now the writer may only zoom onto one of the last phrases details—“walls,” “composed,” “prefabricated,” “cement,” or “blocks”—because now these details are all that remain in the “camera’s” frame. Since the sentence has zoomed onto the wall, the writer cannot zoom up to any details in the we-toured-Hollyhock-house part of the sentence (or other-

**Workout.**

Write ten flow sentences, using the Freighting technique, each one about a different aspect of your life: one about foods you enjoy, one about films or books that mean much to you, one about your family or work. They should each be six typed lines long and numbered; do not worry about putting them in an essay. As with the sample sentences, some freight cars should be stacked high with weighty material, other cars may be left with one item, and if you need to, use a connecting word (a conjunction) only one time per sentence to attach a related sentence train to your first train in order to sustain a longer flow.