

Stylistic Imitation as a Heuristic for Free Writing



LaVona Reeves

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Min Yi Liang

In “Using Stylistic Imitation in Freshman Writing Classes...” Denise Stodola concurs with Stanley Fish who argued that “students can’t write clean English sentences because they are not being taught what sentences are” (57) or what “good” paragraphs look like. The Oxford English Dictionary defines style as “[t]he manner of expression characteristic of a particular writer... a writer’s mode of expression considered in regard to cleanness, effectiveness, beauty, and the like” (cited in Stodola, 58). Noguchi further defines style as “[a]n author’s choice and arrangement of words, sentence structures, and ideas as well as less definable characteristics such as rhythm and euphony” (59). We demonstrate how to do stylistic imitation using excerpts from J. K. Rowling and Katherine Anne Porter, as well as Lakota memoirist, Delphine Redshirt. The emphasis on style is not ornamental, but practical and rhetorical—it provides writers tools for crafting sentences and paragraphs that appeal to particular audiences of their choosing. We move from close to free imitation so that writers have no need to concern themselves with issues of plagiarism. If they do decide to include some of the syntax or original words of the authors, then we ask them to cite the original and place exact words in quotes. We encourage teachers to participate with their students and share their writing as we have done here.

Rowling: The “it” cleft sentence.

Original sentence: “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

Imitation: “It is our many silences, son, that show what we truly believe, far more than our many words.” LaVona Reeves

Prompt: Your own—you may modify the original as I did in the second example above.

Now incorporate your sentence into a short paragraph: “Great-Grandpa

Min Yi Liang, originally from Guang Dong Province in China, is completing a master’s thesis on stylistic imitation under the supervision of LaVona Reeves, the instructor in whose class stylistic imitation was done with undergraduate senior English majors who will be teaching ESL and/or English. Together, they analyzed the pre-service teachers’ paragraphs based on the syntax of Katherine Anne Porter’s “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” and on Dr. Reeves’ own narrative about her mother who built bombs. Min Yi graduated from Spokane’s Central Valley High School, earned the B. A. in Interdisciplinary Studies from EWU, and will soon earn the Master of Arts in English with a TESL Emphasis from EWU.

was a man of few words—he knew when to say nothing, when to listen, and when to stay calm. His quiet presence helped us as children and made parenting a bit easier for our parents. From him, we learned that it is our many silences, son, ‘that show what we truly’ believe, far more than our many words.” LaVona Reeves (inspired by Rowling)

Cup of tea by Nouf Alkidhr

Think of something simple and sentimental that gives you joy.

Original Text:

Cup of Tea
Little things in life gives us joy
on my list I have a cup of tea.
Sharing things gives us more joy
so I decided to share this with you.
Like the two spoons of sugar
you sweeten my life just enough.
Like the tea’s red color
you give me the warmth of love.
And like the water
you wash all my worries.
I had cups of tea in my life before
but I rather have you instead.
Because you’re better than them all
as you fill my cup with joy!

Nouf Alkidhr

Imitation:

Wild Swans at Eloika Lake
“Little things in life give us joy.
On my list I have” two beautiful, wild swans.
“Sharing things gives us more joy,
so I decided to share” this pair bond with you.
Like the swans and the cranes, who mate for life,
I hope our love will be like theirs
and last forever.
Like the wild swan who sits alone on the lake,
I will keep you in my thoughts
as you move on to the next life....

LaVona Reeves (inspired by Alkidhr, 2019)

Prompt:

“Little things in life give us joy.
On my list I have” _____.
“Sharing things gives us more joy,
so I decided to share this with you.”
Like the _____,

Mirror Image

Write a mirror image of Porter’s paragraph from “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” and put your own life into your short essay—one introducing the person or yourself.

Original Text:

She had fenced in a hundred acres once, digging the post holes herself and clamping the wires with just a negro boy to help. That changed a woman. John would be looking for a young woman with a peaked Spanish comb in her hair and the painted fan. Digging post holes changed a woman. Riding country roads in the winter when women had their babies was another thing. [Her accomplishments were] sitting up at night with sick horses and sick negroes (Weatherall, 1929)

Close Imitation:

Mother

Mother had built Halitzer bombs once, putting in the timing devices herself and packing the crates with just women to help. That changed a woman. Great-grandpa would be looking for a country girl with long, chestnut braids in her hair and starry eyes. Making bombs changed a woman. Operating forklifts in wartime when jobs were scarce and money was tight was another thing. [Her accomplishments were] staying up all night with tired women and tired children and tired elders and hardly ever giving up on one. Great-grandpa, [she] hardly ever gave up on one of them! (LaVona Reeves, inspired by Porter)

Free Variation:

Uncle Hai by Min Yi Liang

Uncle had practiced Chinese writing once, writing on the papers himself and correcting it with just himself to change. Uncle used to have sloppy handwriting. When my uncle was about ten years old, his family – father, mother, and sisters – always complained about his unreadable writing. Time after time, he heard complaints about his writing. He would be hoping to change his handwriting and to show other people that he could write nicely too. That changed a boy. Writing very nicely on the papers when spending time with friends was another thing. He gave up his playtime to practice his handwriting. Every day after school, uncle would took out brush, ink, and old newspaper to practice writing. At that time, his father, my grandpa, could not buy nice white papers for his son to practice writing. However, he collected old newspapers from neighbors, so that uncle could use them to write. Grandpa would be looking for a better work with a nice handwriting and the understandable writing in uncle’s papers. Practicing writing changed a boy. Staying up

all night with tired eyes and tired arms and tired hands and hardly ever giving up on one. With much practice, uncle had changed his handwriting. Now, everyone has commented on his very nice handwriting.

Pre-service English Teacher's Close Imitation (cited in Liang, 2019, p. 60)

Tante Kristel had hidden from the war once, waiting in the forest herself and watching the planes with just a single candle to see. That changed a girl. Her brother would be looking for a small child with a half-melted candle in her hand and a face full of fear. Living through the war changed a girl. Hiding her tears in the night when her youngest brother died was another thing. [Her accomplishments were] getting up in the morning with shaking limbs and aching lungs and eyes full of tears and hardly ever letting one fall. Gabi, [she] hardly ever let one of them fall! (Inspired by Katherine Anne Porter)

A Lesson from Delphine Redshirt's Bead on an Anthill

In those days we did not converse with the wasicu [Lakota for white folks]. We were too self-conscious in our use of English, and they were too self-conscious to speak in Lakota. The only people who spoke to us were the storekeepers, and they raised their voices an octave as if we were hard of hearing. "How much do you want for that?" she would ask... "Four dollars," the merchant would say.... My mother would then walk away, and the merchant might say, "I'll tell you what. I'll give it to you for two and a half bucks." "I'll take it," my mother would say, money in hand. I do not remember any real conversations between us and them... It was in this place that I learned to grow quiet and to watch the wasicu with distrustful eyes—the way the storekeeper watched me when I entered his store on Main Street. (Redshirt)

Prompt: Write about a time you learned to be quiet and watch others. End your paragraph with "It was in this place that I learned"_____. And fill in what you learned after that. This is my paragraph I wrote.

Cloth Diapers

When I taught at a national university in Japan for two years, I often went to a "cheap shop"—the English loan term that Japanese used to describe a place like a Dollar Store but far more expensive by American standards. When foreigners entered the shop, the clerks seemed uncomfortable and a bit surprised to see a blond, blue-eyed woman with two little ones asking about cloth diapers and underwear and t-shirts for her children—one of whom looked Japanese or at least "half" as they say in Japan. At the time, the dollar was pretty weak, and so yen cost a lot for us if we were paid in dollars. At first, I had only dollars until I got my first paycheck from Osaka University, but I had a newborn who needed dozens of diapers—paper diapers were not allowed at the university daycare where my newborn would be cared for on campus. I needed help figuring out how many dollars I was actually spending, so I asked the clerk to help me do the calculation in my somewhat broken Japanese. She helped me, and I put back one dozen, saying that I was sorry to be buying so little. But she was really kind to me, saying that I was brave to live alone in a foreign country with a newborn and a toddler. And she sent me off, saying, "You are so skilled in your Japanese. And so brave." "It was in this place that I learned" the lesson of sisterhood: no matter where we are giving birth in this world, other mothers understand and help the foreigner and give lovingly to console the one who has little money and even less cultural understanding. This Japanese mother/clerk showed us her love and care while carefully calculating how many dollars I was spending and offering to save back that other dozen until my payday came. (LaVona Reeves)

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