**The Cumulative Sentence**

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The philosophy of the cumulative sentence was codified by Francis Christensen in his “A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence, ” first published in *College Composition and Communication* in October 1963.  But Christensen credited novelist John Erskine with inspiring this philosophy in a 1946 essay published in *Twentieth Century English*.  That essay, “A Note on the Writer’s Craft,” directly challenged the “simple and direct” school of composition that stressed the paring down of writing and championed modification.  As Erskine explained:

**When you write, you make a point, not by subtracting as though you sharpened a pencil, but by adding.** When you put one word after another, your statement should be more precise the more you add,  If the result is otherwise, you have added the wrong thing, or you have added more than was needed.

           . . . the grammarian leaves with the unwary the impression that the substantive, since it can stand alone, is more important than the adjective, that the verb is more important than the adverb, that the main clause is more important than the subordinate.

           In the use of language, however, the truth is precisely the reverse,  What you wish to say is found not in the noun but in what you add to qualify the noun.  The noun is only a grappling iron to hitch your mind to the reader’s.  The noun by itself adds nothing to the reader’s information;  it is the name of something he knows already, and if he does not know it, you cannot do business with him.  **The noun, the verb, and the main clause serve merely as a base on which the meaning will rise.**

**The modifier is the essential part of any sentence.**

Quoted in Francis Christensen, “A Lesson from Hemingway,” *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric:  6 Essays for Teachers*.  (Harper & Row:  New York, 1967), 24-25

The cumulative sentence might be thought of as a major kind of adjectival sentence (to use the terms suggested by Josephine Miles).  The main feature of this sentence pattern is that it packages modifiers as unbound words or phrases--that is, in ways that will usually allow them to appear in the sentence in different positions, rather than bound to the word or words they modify.

**In this way, the cumulative modifying phrases may open, close, or appear in the middle of the sentence.**

For example, given "boy" as the object of modification and "crying loudly" as the modifying phrase, we might construct a sentence with that phrase in the initial slot (Crying loudly, the boy left.), the final slot (The boy left, crying loudly.), or the medial slot (The boy, crying loudly, left).

The cumulative sentence is most typical and probably appears most frequently when the modifying phrase or phrases appear in the final position, since the whole idea behind the cumulative sentence is that it quickly posits a somewhat stark or kernel-like base clause (subject and verb, or subject, verb, object), then presents much more information about that base clause in subsequent modifying phrases.

For example:  They drank their coffees, the old man downing his in one quick gulp, spilling several drops on his faded shirt, the finely dressed young woman nursing hers along quite slowly, carefully raising and lowering the cup to her lips as if it contained nitroglycerine rather than coffee, a stiffly mechanical process that suggested her nervousness more than her control.

Cumulative sentences are easy to write, a process of adding modifying phrases to the base clause of the sentence, each phrase adding to our understanding or sharpening our visualization of the preceding phrase or of the base clause, taking us through increasingly specific sentence levels, each level another step for the sentence, the cumulative form encouraging us to write more than we otherwise might, teasing material from our thinking that we did not at first consider sharing, details we first omitted, actually a generative or heuristic process, a process that urges us to add information to the sentence, somewhat like a snowball that rolls downhill, picking up size and momentum as it goes.  ***To give*** ***any sentence more of a cumulative form, simply replace its period with a comma and start adding modifying phrases.***

Cumulative sentences can further be divided into those whose modifying phrases are **coordinate** (phrases parallel, each modifying the base clause), **subordinate** (phrases not parallel, each modifying the preceding phrase rather than the base clause), or **mixed** (phrases a mixture of coordinate and subordinate forms, usually with one structure primary).

**Coordinate levels** can be thought of as modifying the entire base clause, or as focusing on one of its elements.  Given a base clause containing a subject, a verb, and a direct object, the coordinate modifying levels may sharpen/focus on the whole clause, its subject, verb, or object.  Coordinate levels keep the sentence running in place as more information is added to its load.

1.  He drove the car, carefully, never speeding, never running red lights, always looking both ways at intersections, always defensive.

2.  He drove the car, turning down the old country road, shifting into first gear as his speed slowed, absently glancing at the farms on either side of him, desperately wondering what to do next.

3.  He drove the car, his shaggy hair whipped by the wind, his eyes hidden behind wraparound mirrorshades, his mouth set in a grim smile, a .38 Police Special on the seat beside him, the corpse stuffed in the trunk.

4.  He drove the car, a rusted old yellow and cream colored Rambler, a relic from the days when a car's weight meant as much as did its mileage, a purchase he had often questioned, an impulse buy he had never really understood, but had never regretted.

(Of course, when modifiers are added to the base clause, they further expand the modification options for cumulative phrases:  He carefully drove the rented car back toward town.)

**Subordinate levels** move the focus of the sentence forward, moving from general to specific, zooming in like a movie camera.  They can also break a whole into its constituent parts, accomplishing the same end as do some uses of the colon (:).  Subordinate levels can also lead us into new thoughts, nudging us to be ever more specific, to refine and/or detail whatever we have just written.  However, these subordinate levels can also run amok, taking us away from our subject, diverting attention to subsidiary, incidental, even irrelevant details, details for which we have no real need or use, being ever mindful of our reader's time and patience, patience we run the risk of sorely taxing with sentences such as this one, sentences that seem to go on and on, moving us further and further from what we started to say, making the subordinate form seem more and more aimless.

5.  He drove carefully, trying to protect his old Rambler, a rusted yellow and cream colored Classic sedan, one with Rambler's legendary reclining seats, seats intended to make driving more relaxing, a good design intention with a number of side effects, some not relaxing at all, side effects that made him the envy of every boy in his high school class.

6.  He drove carefully, one hand on the wheel, the other hand holding a sandwich, a ham and cheese fossil, a strangely colored lump made three days before by his sister, a simple, trusting woman, someone who deserved a better life than fate had dealt her, a life of happiness if not of success, the basic happiness of feeling loved and needed.

7.  He drove carefully, his thoughts drifting back to other trips, fondly remembered Sunday outings, outings made wonderful by his mother and father, warm and humorous parents he would never see again.

8.  They drove carefully, he with hands on the wheel in the prescribed position at ten and two, his eyes riveted to the road, a road almost invisible beyond the sheets of rain that pelted the windshield, she checking and rechecking the map, calling out town names and possible landmarks, landmarks neither could possible see, both growing more tense and worried by the minute, neither able to say anything soothing or encouraging, their vacation dissolving into a nightmare of bad weather and wrong turns.

9.  A good novel must teach us something about human nature, showing us how characters react to different kinds of conflict, allowing us to judge whether we approve or disapprove of their decisions, giving us the chance to consider what we might do if faced with similar situations.

10.  I love this novel because of the way it is written, its characters so believable I feel I actually know them, its plot filled with unexpected turns that make me reassess everything I thought I had figured out, its sentences crisp and clear and precise, never leaving me wondering what the author really had in mind.

**Cumulative Exercises:  Develop the following sentences using the indicated cumulative patterns.**

1.  This room looks like a disaster area,

     (2) its\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

     (2) its \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

     (2) its \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

2.  She got out of the car,

     (2) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*ing*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

     (2) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_*ing*\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

     (2)  its \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

     (2) her\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

3.  Big Al headed back into the bar,

     (2)  a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

     (2)  his \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ ,

            (3) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

            (3) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

4.  They sat down at the table,

     (2)  he\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

             (3) his \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

             (3) his\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

     (2)  she\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

            (3)  her\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

            (3)  her\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

     (2)  the table\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

            (3)  its\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

            (3)  its\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

     (2)  the overall scene suggesting \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

5.  Cumulative sentences can take any number of forms,

     (2)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

     (2)  their \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

            (3)  allowing us to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

                  (4)  a process\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

                        (5)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

                        (5)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

                        (5)\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_