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**Sentence Sounds:  
Exploring the “Conjunctive” and “Disjunctive”**

**Use to Write:** Short Fiction; Longer Fiction; Autobiography;  
Creative Nonfiction; Essay

**Ideas and Concepts** “conjunctive” vs. “disjunctive” modes of writing.  
**to Explore:**

**Authors/Works** Raymond Carver; Michael Collins; Don DeLillo;  
**Mentioned:** Robert Frost; Ernest Hemingway; Richard Hugo;  
Nancy Kruseo; Jan Ramjerdi; Christa Wolf.

*I give you a new definition of a sentence:*

*A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may  
be strung.*

*You may string words together without a sentence sound to string them  
on just as you may tie clothes together by the sleeves and stretch them  
without a clothes line between two trees, but—it is bad for the  
clothes . . .*

*. . . The ear does it. The ear is the only true writer and the only true  
reader. I have known people who could read without hearing the  
sentence sounds and they were the fastest reader. Eye readers we call  
them. They can get the meaning by glances. But they are bad readers  
because they miss the best part of what a good writer puts into his  
work.*

—Robert Frost

Some of the finest prose-writers think first of themselves as “sentence-writers.” They are writers full-blown in love with the arc of a sentence, what can be done with a subject and verb, how it feels in their mouths and their ears, the sound and the cadence of it. Although otherwise like many people you may know, they dream

of themselves curling into their syntax as they push at the envelope of sentence possibilities. They hear the siren call of sentence sounds, and this, more than anything, makes them the writers they are.

Two prominent modes of American sentences are “conjunction” and “disjunction.” Twentieth century disjunctive prose descends directly from Hemingway to Carver. Disjunctive sentences are short and hard edged, often with a little space—or gap—between them. Often, this space—or gap—reverberates. Disjunctive sentences use mostly Germanic-rooted words. Their style is spare and lean and highly suggestive. They characterize much minimalist writing.

Listen, for example, to these:

The end of the world was a school day. There was even home work due. It seemed strange.

—Michael Collins

The restaurant was not very gay. It was in a large square room on the first floor of an old house. Ben led her to a table near the wall and told her to sit down.

—Jane Bowles

She met him at a dance. Pretty, too, and young. Said he worked in a restaurant, but she can't remember which one. Geraldo. That's all. Green pants and Saturday shirt. Geraldo. That's what he told her.

—Sandra Cisneros

It shows a man driving a car. It is the simplest sort of home video. You see a man at the wheel of a medium Dodge.

—Don DeLillo

Conjunctive sentences, on the other hand, are long, loopy and mellifluous, interconnected with multiple coordinate and subordinate conjunctions. They are complex, with many clauses. They are lyrical and often Latinate. They come to us down through Faulkner, dense and evocative, poetic.

Listen, for example, to these:

Why is it that we can't bear being the victims of chance. I sat down at my desk to finally read the morning mail, among other things a letter from that woman, over eighty years old, who writes to me from London in her generous, aged handwriting, and whom I would so much like to see—a wish I nourish within me without yielding too much to the doubts that stir within me the longer her illness, we both say “exhaustion,” lasts.

—Christa Wolf

All right, man, so I'm busing down tables—we gotta do our own here, and we gotta sweep, mop, wash dishes, and do just about everything else,

too—and I'm trying to keep flies off my arms and the sweat out of my eyes and the seam of these polyester monkey-suit pants from working in the crack of my ass.

—Reginald McKnight

I am thinking of the walk to Rose Point, the narrow path along the cliff, the bright green shoots, the noise of new earthen flowers in wet environments, where all things disintegrate, she didn't love me dearly, I'd have to say, I played at being cheerful, land, I would cut in space new landscapes, explain that: Everything changes where something appears in the interval: the little round RV with blue curtains in the rear window: memory-images; some thing that would sever the bonds between remembrance and the present reality.

—Nancy Krusec and Jan Ramjerdt

In this revision exercise, experiment with conjunctive and disjunctive sentences by rethinking your story entirely at the sentence level. Write it first disjunctively; then rewrite it conjunctively. Set yourself word limits—ten, no more than fifteen in the disjunctive mode; thirty, forty, fifty, or more, in the conjunctive mode. Pay attention to ways you can combine the sentences of your “disjunctive” text to make it more “conjunctive.” Play with the connections, their flexibility and nuance. Stretch. As you work, think about what happens when you write in different kinds of sentences. What do you have to add, leave out, rearrange, transform? How are the different elements of your story changed?

Don't worry if the story you're revising turns into a whole different story. Revision is like that.

So, for that matter, are stories.

(K.H.)