

Copia: Activity

In 1512, the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) published *De Copia* (meaning “on command of language” or “richness of expression”). Erasmus’s book was one of the most influential rhetoric texts of the European Renaissance. One exercise in Erasmus’ *De Copia* directs students to compose several hundred variations of one sentence. Erasmus demonstrated how student could do this by writing 195 different variations on the sentence, “You letter delighted me greatly”



Desuderius Erasmus

This exercise has three purposes:

- (1) to increase the number of sentence structures a student can use when writing (stuffing the bag of tricks);
- (2) to develop a command of sentence structure (knowing how to generate, manipulate and vary sentence patterns);
- (3) to develop a sense of stylistic judgment (learning what sounds good vs. what sounds bad and why)

What makes this exercise practical is that it requires no grammatical terminology. Indeed, you already have done this exercise in your writing career—whenever you rewrote a sentence to make it sound better. But the idea here is not to limit yourself to a handful of choices by using only what you’re familiar with, for soon you will have written yourself into a box, a confining space in which you can see no other option. Being cut off from possibilities forces you to keep a sentence that doesn’t have the effect you’re looking for and that probably should be boxed up and sent back. Be bold and imaginative and experimental in recording information, in revising your sentences.

As Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) (another Renaissance figure and the namesake of a triangle and a computer language) wrote a century after Erasmus's era, **“Words differently arranged have different meanings, and meanings differently arranged have different effects.”** Erasmus's exercise teaches both the different arrangements and an appreciation of the different effects.

Example

Taken from Thomas B. Costain's historical novel *The Conquering Family*, the following sentence describes the conditions under which a man must make a hazardous horseback ride to London, where he hopes to claim the throne of England:

- **A sleet was falling which turned the roads into sheets of ice.**

The sentence communicates the discomfort and danger the rider had to suffer as he was threatened both with being frozen and with being crushed beneath a falling horse.

Retaining the original vocabulary except where grammar or idiom requires a substitution, we can compose different versions of Costain's sentence.

Here are a few of the over four hundred possibilities:

- (1) A sleet was falling, which turned the roads into sheets of ice.
- (2) A sleet which turned the roads into sheets of ice was falling.
- (3) A sleet, which turned the roads into sheets of ice, was falling.
- (4) A sleet was falling; it turned the road into sheets of ice.
- (5) A sleet was falling, and it turned the roads into sheets of ice.
- (6) A sleet was falling and turning the roads into sheets of ice.
- (7) A falling sleet was turning the roads into sheets of ice.
- (8) Turning the roads into sheets of ice, a sleet was falling.
- (9) The roads turned into sheets of ice in the falling sleet.
- (10) The roads turned into sheets of ice by the sleet that was falling.

- (11) Because of the following sleet, the roads turned into sheets of ice.
- (12) Because a sleet was falling, the roads turned into sheets of ice.
- (13) There was a sleet falling that turned the roads into sheets of ice.
- (14) A sleetfall turned the roads into sheets of ice.
- (15) It was a falling sleet that turned the roads into sheets of ice.

And we can double the number of sentences simply by turning “sheets of ice” into “icy sheets.”

Now, it is your turn. Take a look at your writing and choose a sentence that you think could be better. You might also pick a sentence that represents the typical kind of sentence you normally write. Once you have selected your sentence,