



Image Grammar

Teaching Grammar as Part of the
Writing Process



Where Did Image Grammar Begin?

When confronted with the two contrasting schools of grammar thought, the traditional grilling of rules and the holistic learning from literature, teacher and educator Harry Noden strived to find a place in between.

His feelings going into the creation of Brush Strokes began as so-

“The writer is an artist painting images of life with specific and identifiable brush strokes, images as realistic as Wyeth and as abstract as Picasso. In the act of creation, the writer, like the artist, relies on fundamental elements.”

(Harry Noden, *Image Grammar*, p.1, 1999)

Essentially, the paper is the palette, and the sentence structure we construct are the colors and strokes we put to it.



The Writer as Artist

Watercolorist, Frank Webb explained, “Pictures are not made of flowers, guitars, people, surf or turf, but with irreducible elements of art: shapes, tones, directions, sizes, lines, textures, and color.”

(Harry Noden, *Image Grammar*, p.1, 1999)



The Writer as Artist

Similarly, writing is not constructed merely from experiences, information, characters or plots, but from fundamental artistic elements of grammar.

(Harry Noden, *Image Grammar*, p.1, 1999)



The Writer as Artist

Observe, for example, how James Michener paints a scene in his historical novel *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*:

Now the great carrier struck a sea trough and slid away, her deck lurching, but relentlessly the bull horn cried, "Move jets into position for launching," and the catapult crew, fighting for footing on the sliding deck, sprang swiftly into action, inching two heavy Banshees onto the catapults, taking painful care not to allow the jets to get rolling, lest they plunge overboard with some sudden shifting of the deck (1953, 5).



The Writer as Artist

Or Carl Sagan's images of galaxies in his nonfiction work *Cosmos*:

From an intergalactic vantage point we would see, strewn like sea froth on the waves of space, innumerable faint, wispy tendrils of light. These are the galaxies. Some are solitary wanderers; most inhabit communal clusters, huddling together, drifting endlessly in the great cosmic dark. Before us is the Cosmos on the grandest scale we know. We are in the realm of the nebulae, eight billion light years from Earth, halfway to the edge of the known universe (1980, 5).



The Writer as Artist

To paint images like these requires an understanding of image grammar—a rhetoric of writing techniques that provides writers with artistic grammatical options.

(Harry Noden, *Image Grammar*, p.2, 1999)



The Writer as Artist

Writing as Seeing

Developing a grammar style begins with the writer learning to literally “see.”

Compare the following two images, the first written by a high school student, the second by well-known novelist Brian Jacques:



The Writer as Artist

Writing as Seeing

It was winter. Everything was frozen and white with snow. Snow had fallen from the sky for days. The weather was horrible.

Mossflower lay deep in the grip of midwinter beneath a sky of leaden gray that showed tinges of scarlet and orange on the horizon. A cold mantle of snow draped the landscape, covering the flatlands to the west. Snow was everywhere, filling the ditches, drifting high against the hedgerows, making paths invisible, smoothing the contours of earth in its white embrace (1988, 5).



The Writer as Artist

Writing as Seeing

Jacques writes with an artist's eye, using detail and color to tease the reader's visual appetite; the high school student writes like a house painter, ignoring the details and using color to simply cover the surface. One can see why Jacques' one word of advice to writers is paint: "Paint. That's the magic word. Paint pictures with words" (O'Neill. 1995, 37).



The Writer as Artist

Writing as Seeing

There are two categories of *seeing*:
showing and *telling*.

Can you tell the difference?



The Writer as Artist

Writing as Seeing

“The weird, old man is reaching for something.”

“And before Halleck can jerk away, the old Gypsy reaches out and caresses his cheek with one twisted finger. His lips spread open like a wound, showing a few tombstone stumps poking out of his gums. They are black and green. His tongue squirms between them and then slides out to lick his grinning, bitter lips” (King. 1985, 1).



The Writer as Artist

Five Basic Brush Strokes

Just as a painter combines a wide repertoire of brush stroke techniques to create an image, the writer chooses from a repertoire of sentence structures.



The Five Basic Brush Strokes

Participle

Action Verb

Appositive

Absolute

**Adjective
Out of Order**



Writers, like artists, paint images.

Novelist Robert Newton Peck explains this concept in his *Secrets of Successful Fiction*:

Readers want a picture—something to see, not just a paragraph to read. A picture made out of words. That's what makes a pro out of an amateur. An amateur writer tells a story. A pro shows the story, creates a picture to look at instead of just words to read. A good author writes with a camera, not with a pen.

The amateur writes: "Bill was nervous."

The pro writes: "Bill sat in a dentist's waiting room, peeling the skin at the edge of his thumb, until the raw, red flesh began to show. Biting the torn cuticle, he ripped it away, and sucked at the warm sweetness of his own blood" (1980, 4).



How do writers paint images like Peck's example?
One way is by using five simple grammatical structures called the *writer's brush strokes*:

1. the **participle**
2. the **absolute**
3. the **appositive**
4. **adjectives** shifted **out of order**
5. **action verbs.**



To examine each of these five brush strokes, we'll follow four simple steps.

- STEP 1.** First we will look at a simple definition of the brush stroke.
- STEP 2.** Next, we will begin with a short, simple sentence that describes an image.
- STEP 3.** We will use an imaginary zoom lens that will help us to either see or imagine a close-up detail.
- STEP 4.** Finally, we will add a brush stroke that captures that close-up detail.



Step 1

Definition of the Participle Brush Stroke

A participle is an *ing* word placed at the beginning or end of a complete sentence. (Don't place the participle in the middle of the sentence or it might become part of the verb.)



Step 2

Create a short, simple sentence of the image you want to describe. For example, with this image you might write a short sentence like this:

The diamond-back snake attacked its prey.





Step 3

Imagine you are a photographer viewing the rattlesnake through a camera zoom lens. Look for specific details—details that you want to capture and use in step 4.

This zoom lens is unique. It allows you to examine visual details that you can see and imaginary details that you can't see or hear. For example, you might see the snake's curled body ready to strike and observe the diamond pattern on its skin. But with this zoom lens, you can also use your imagination to describe things you can't actually see, like the sputtering sound of the snake's rattle or the slithering movement of its body.





Step 4

With this step, you have two choices. First, you might add one to three *ing* participle brush strokes like this:

Hissing, slithering, and coiling,
the diamond-back snake attacked
its prey.





Or you can choose to add one or two participial phrases. A participial phrase is just a participle (*ing* word) with other modifying words attached to it.

Hissing its forked red tongue and coiling its cold body, the diamond-back snake attacked its prey.





NOTE: Adding one or two participial phrases at the beginning or end of a sentence can strengthen an image. However, three phrases usually don't work.



Another Example

Let's complete the four steps again using participles.



Step 1

A participle is an *ing* word placed at the beginning or end of a complete sentence. (Don't place the participle in the middle of the sentence or it might become part of the verb.)



Step 2

Create a short, simple sentence about the image you want to describe. For the image on the right you might write a short sentence like this:

The cowboy needed to stay on another fifteen seconds to win.





Step 3

Imagine you are a photographer viewing the image through a camera zoom lens. Look for specific details—details you want to capture and use in step 4.





Step 4

With this step, you have two choices. First, you might add one to three *ing* participle brush strokes, like this:

Struggling, holding, hoping, the cowboy fought to stay on long enough to win.





Or you can add one or two participial phrases. A participial phrase is just a participle (*ing* word) with other modifying words attached to it.

Struggling with each sledgehammer kick of the bull, holding tight with one hand, the cowboy fought to stay on long enough to win.





Here are a few more examples of participles created by well-known authors.

The first example is taken from Robert Ludlum's *The Bourne Identity*:

*The man got out of the chair with difficulty, **pushing himself up with his arms, holding his breath as he rose.***



Ernest Hemingway uses participial phrases to create tension and action in this excerpt from *Old Man and the Sea*:

Shifting the weight of the line to his left shoulder and kneeling carefully, he washed his hand in the ocean and held it there, submerged for more than a minute, watching the blood trail away and the steady movement of the water against his hand as the boat moved.



Now it is your turn. Review the following three images and select one to write about. Create one short sentence first. Then, use your zoom lens and decide whether you want to add one or two long participial phrases or three one-word participles.







Step 1

Definition of the **Absolute** Brush Stroke

An absolute is a combination of a noun followed by a participle (an *ing* word).

Here are a few examples, the first from Ann Rice, the others from students.

*The mummy's right arm was outstretched, **the torn wrappings hanging from it**, as the being stepped out of its gilded box! —Anne Rice, from *The Mummy**

Mind racing, anxiety overtaking, the diver peered once more at the specimen.
(Erin Stralka)

I glanced at my clock, **digits glowing fluorescent blue in the inky darkness of my room**. (Jenn Coppolo)

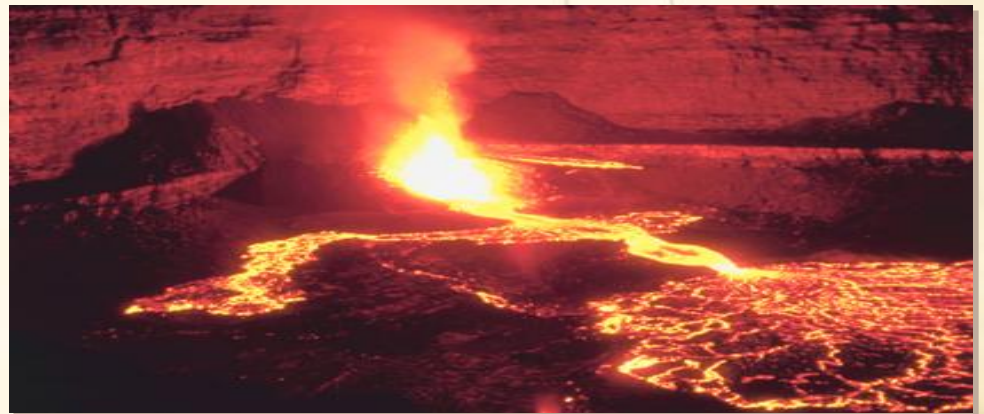
Jaws cracking, tongue curling, the kitten yawned tiredly, awaking from her nap.
(Tara Tesmer)



Step 2

Create a short, simple sentence about the image you want to describe. For the image on the right you might write a sentence like this:

The volcano erupted violently.





Step 3

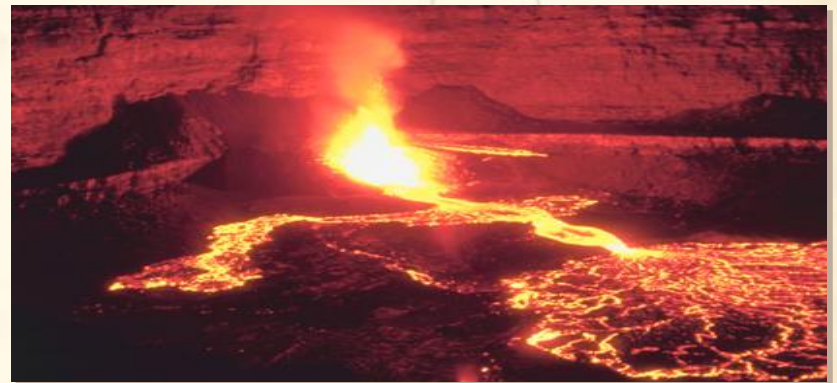
Imagine you are a photographer viewing the image through a camera zoom lens. Your task is to look for specific details—details you want to capture and use in step 4. Remember, these details can be real or imagined.





Step 4

Add absolutes to the simple sentence.
The volcano erupted violently,
molten lava ravaging the
mountainside, smoke clouds
smothering the wildlife.





Another Example

Let's complete the four steps again using absolutes.



Step 1

An absolute is a combination of a noun followed by a participle (an *ing* word).

Note that all of the brush stroke definitions are simplified to the point that they translate well into effective writing techniques; however, they can be criticized as incomplete by scholars.



Step 2

Create a short, simple sentence about the image you want to describe. For the image on the right you might write a sentence like this:

The scuba diver froze, not knowing what to do.





Step 3

Imagine you are a photographer viewing the image through a camera zoom lens. Look for specific details—details you want to capture and use in step 4. Remember, these details can be real or imagined.





Step 4

Add absolutes to the simple sentence.
A shark circling, oxygen running out, the scuba diver froze, not knowing what to do.





Now it is your turn. Review the following three images and select one to write about. Create one short sentence first. Then review the definition of the absolute and use your zoom lens to search for details. Finally, paint an absolute into your simple sentence.









Step 1

Definition of the **Appositive** Brush Stroke

An appositive is a noun that follows another noun and refers to the same thing. For example, in the sentence “The car, a new Porsche, ran out of gas,” the words *car* and *Porsche* refer to the same thing. The second noun (*Porsche*) is usually more specific and designated as the appositive. Having a second noun often allows the writer to add more detail and emotion.



Step 2

Create a short, simple sentence about the image you want to describe. For this image you might write a sentence like this:

The raccoon loves to hunt turtle eggs on dark spring nights.





Step 3

Imagine you are a photographer viewing the image through a camera zoom lens. Think of labels for your main noun (*raccoon*), like *creature*, *animal*, *beast*, *scavenger*, *thief*, *pet*, *plaything*, etc.

Look for a noun that fits your characterization of the raccoon. If you are depicting him as fun-loving, a word like *plaything* or *pet* might work. If you want the raccoon to be portrayed with some suspicion, you might use an appositive like *scavenger* or *thief*.





Step 4

Add your appositive to the sentence.
The raccoon, a **clever scavenger**,
loves to hunt turtle eggs on dark
spring nights.





Another Example

Let's complete the four steps again using appositives.



Step 1

An appositive is a noun that follows another noun and refers to the same thing.



Step 2

Create a short, simple sentence about the image you want to describe. For this image you might write a sentence like this:

The diver plunged 500 feet down into the deep river rapids on a fifty dollar bet.





Step 3

Imagine you are a photographer viewing the image through a camera zoom lens. Think of labels for your main noun (*diver*), like *daredevil*, *stunt man*, *acrobat*, *risk taker*, *madman*.





Step 4

Add the appositive to the sentence:
The diver, **the local daredevil**,
plunged 500 feet down into the
deep river rapids on a fifty dollar
bet.





Now it is your turn. Review the following three images and select one to write about. Create one short sentence first. Then review the nouns that might work with your main image.







Step 1

Definition of Adjectives Out of Order

When amateur writers want to use adjectives, they jam a long list into a sentence, like this: *The tall, white, muscular, fearless horse galloped across the dusty field.*

A professional author who wants to use a number of adjectives selects a maximum of three adjectives, then places one before the noun it modifies and two after. Our sample sentence about the horse would read like the example on the following slide.



The **white** horse, **muscular and fearless**, galloped across the dusty field.

Placing two of the adjectives after the noun *horse* creates a spotlight, giving the adjectives a more profound quality.





Here are a few more examples to review before you create your own.

The Pavilion was a simple city, **long and rectangular**.

—Caleb Carr, in *The Alienist*

I could smell Mama, **crisp and starched**, plumping my pillow.

—Robert Newton Peck, in *A Day No Pigs Would Die*

The woman, **old and wrinkled**, smiled upon her newborn great-grandson with pride.

—Student Stephanie Schwallie

The boxer, **twisted and tormented**, felt no compassion for his contender.

—Student Chris Hloros



Step 2

Create a short, simple sentence about the image you want to describe. For the image on the right you might write a sentence like this:

The gorilla stared scornfully at the zookeeper.





Step 3

Imagine you are a photographer viewing the image through a camera zoom lens. List five adjectives that describe the gorilla. Use this format: *The _____, _____, _____, gorilla stared scornfully at the zookeeper.*





Here are some adjectives that could be used to fill the blanks: *angry*, *irritated*, *infuriate*, *enraged*, *fuming*.

Here is how they appear when added to the sentence:

The **angry**, **irritated**, **infuriated**, **enraged**, and **fuming** gorilla stared scornfully at the zookeeper.





Step 4

Select three adjectives from your list of five. Then place once of them before the word *gorilla* and two of them after it. The result will be much more powerful.

The **angry** gorilla, **irritated and fuming**, stared scornfully at the zookeeper.

Authors often shift only two adjectives as in a sentence such as the following:

The gorilla, **infuriated and volatile**, stared scornfully at the zookeeper.





Using the four steps we have just demonstrated, create a one-sentence description that includes adjectives out of order. Select from the following images.

A large empty rectangular box with a faint circular outline, intended for writing a one-sentence description.







- **Active Versus Passive Verbs**

Try this experiment. Close your eyes and visualize this sentence:

The gravel road **was** on the left side of the barn.

Now visualize the following sentence:

The gravel road **curled** around the left side of the barn.

Can you see the difference? The verb *was* creates a still photograph.
The verb *curled* creates a motion picture.



Verbs are cameras that deliver images to your imagination. Being verbs can weaken images by freezing the action, while action verbs create motion pictures. Therefore, in the majority of sentences, authors prefer action verbs.

The most common being verbs include *is*, *was*, *were*, *are*, and *am*. Almost all other verbs are active verbs.



Visualize the difference in the motion picture of your imagination as you compare these two drafts, both written by Shawn Jividen. The first is from a rough draft of her novel *Goose Moon*. The second is her final revision after eliminating being verbs.

FIRST DRAFT

Rockwell was a beautiful lake. Canada geese could be heard across the water bugling like tuneless trumpets. Near the shore, two children were hidden behind a massive maple tree. Watching quietly, they hoped to see the first gosling begin to hatch. Tiny giggles escaped their whispers of excitement.



FINAL DRAFT

Rockwell Lake echoed with the sounds of Canada geese. Their honking bugled across the water like tuneless trumpets. Two children hid behind a massive maple tree. They silently watched, hoping to see the first gosling hatch. Tiny giggles escaped their whispers of excitement.



The two paragraphs below, by student Adam Porter, use a number of these brushstrokes.

Then it crawled in. A spider, a **repulsive, hairy creature, no bigger than a tarantula**, crawled into the room. It **crawled** across the floor up onto his nightstand and stopped, as if it were staring at him. He reached for a nearby copy of *Sports Illustrated*, rolled it up, and **swatted** the spider with all his might.

He looked over only to see a hideous mass of eyes and legs. He had killed it. Just then, another one crawled in, **following the same path as the first**. He killed that one too. Then another one came, and another and another.



There were hundreds of them! **Hands trembling, sweat dripping from his face**, he **flung** the magazine left and right, **trying to kill the spiders**, but there were too many. He dropped the magazine. Helpless now, his eyes darted around the room. He could no longer see the individual spiders. He could just see a thick, black blanket of movement. He started squirming as he felt their fang-like teeth **sink** into his pale flesh like millions of tiny needles **piercing his body**.

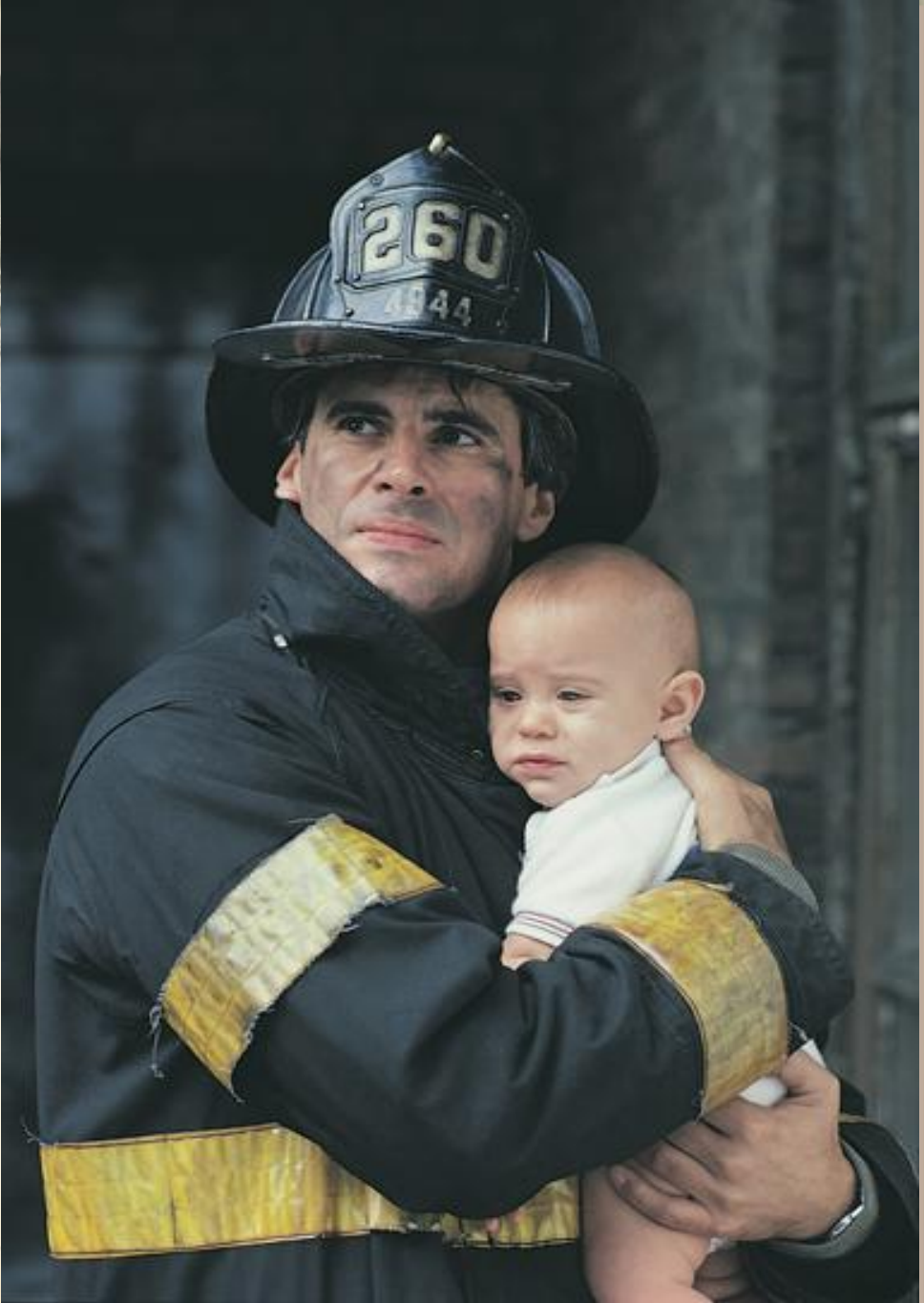


Select one of the five images that follow and write a brief three- or four- sentence paragraph describing the action taking place. You will have to imagine the action since the photograph captures only a single moment.

(You may also find an image of your own choosing through a Google Images search.)

In your paragraph include one example of all of the brush strokes we have studied. Use the rubric in the final slide to evaluate your work.











Rubric for Brush Stroke Assignment

Name: _____ Period: _____

<i>Brush Strokes</i>	<i>Possible Points (10 Pts)</i>	<i>Points Earned</i>
Participle		
Absolute		
Appositive		
Adjectives Out of Order		
Action Verbs		
Total		
Grade		



DEBRIEFING QUESTIONS

Directions: On a scratch piece of paper or on this sheet, answer any or all of the following questions to prepare you for our brief debriefing.

- If you chose to use brush strokes in your grammar instruction, what would it look and sound like in your classroom?
- Are there any Language Arts lessons or ideas you currently teach (reading or writing) where you could incorporate any part of this?
- Describe how it might be used in such situations.
- What are some lingering, unanswered questions you might have regarding this presentation today? Is there something I need to elaborate on or clarify? Please ask.
- What is one beneficial part of this presentation that will “stick” with you?



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