

Smart and well written.
A



The Ocean at the End of Some Jam with Some Grammar in Between

Two of my favorite authors are Ben “Yahtzee” Croshaw and Neil Gaiman. Croshaw is famous for his video games, reviews and comedy novels; Gaiman is known for his work across all of literature, comics, children’s novels, short stories, poetry, and whatever else you can think of. Based on that, the two seem different enough where we could analyze their writing styles and see how it strengthens or weakens the narrative they are trying to construct. For Croshaw, I’ve chosen his comedy/horror novel *Jam*, set in the city of Brisbane where a catastrophe wipes out most of the city. For Gaiman, I’ve chosen *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the story of a man remembering a magical and traumatic time in his childhood on his way to visit an old friend.

We’ll start with Croshaw and the opening paragraphs from *Jam*: “I woke up one morning to find that the entire city had been covered in a three-foot layer of man-eating jam. I didn’t notice straightaway. Our apartment was on the third floor, so the day began as a fairly ordinary one. I got up at around eleven a.m. to go job hunting. I tried to take a shower, but the hot water was off. Then I tried to have some cereal, but the milk was off. The whole refrigerator was off. I fingered the light switch: nothing. The power was cut. None of this was any cause for concern. I glanced over at the increasingly urgent utility bills pinned to the corkboard by the front door. It wasn’t that we couldn’t afford to pay them; it was just that none of us ever really got around to it.”

His first sentence, we see an infinitive phrase using a subordinate clause as its object. The entire infinitive is acting as the direct object of the sentence. One interesting thing to note in this sentence is that he uses the passive voice in his subordinate clause ("city had been covered"). In using the passive, it builds up suspense as to what is happening. If we switch it to the active, it reads "I woke up one morning to find that a three-foot layer of man-eating jam has covered the entire city." In the active, it feels like the punchline is being delivered before the joke is done, so the absurdity of the statement doesn't have the same kind of weight. It helps to put us in the shoes of the narrator as well: he says in his next sentence that "I didn't notice straightaway", like we didn't being that the man-eating jam was the very last bit in the first sentence.

Next thing of interest I noticed was that Croshaw uses a lot of infinitives in these few sentences: "I woke up to find", "I got up to go", "I tried to take", "I tried to have", "we couldn't afford to pay", and in the very last sentence, we see the verb dropped in "got around to (do) it". It becomes repetitious and monotonous, but it helps to give character to the narrator. It gives us the implication that his life is repetitious and monotonous. He does the same things every day, and we are seeing the same verbal repeated in every sentence. Let's take a look at the last sentence where this pattern is changed a little, "none of us ever really got around to it." The prior sentences using the infinitive are more proper sounding and they are associated with more respectable activities. However, this last bit is a bit more rushed and has a more casual tone to it, which is fitting because he is talking about just not paying bills. As the narrator falls into immature behavior, we see that change happen in the way he is speaking, becoming more rushed and dropping the verb in his verbal.

Next let's take a look at his decision to use a colon in "I fingered the light switch: nothing". He could have used "I fingered the light switch and got nothing" and had the same

exact meaning. However, that comes off as clunky in a sentence that short. With the colon, it flows nicer and adds a dramatic pause. Reading it out loud, it takes longer to finish than without the colon, despite having less words. It's such a small sentence, but it carries weight with it. In his last sentence, the usage of the semicolon has a similar pause, but gives us a different effect, "It wasn't that we couldn't afford to pay them; it was just that none of us ever really got around to it". The wait in between the two clauses makes the second one more suspect. Reading it out loud, it almost sounds like the narrator is trying to think up an excuse as to why the bills weren't paid. It sends a message to the reader that the narrator isn't a responsible individual.

Now let's take a look at Gaiman's piece towards the end of *Ocean*: "Ginnie clambered out of the water, and she stood at the water's edge beside me, her head bowed. The waves crashed and smacked and splashed and retreated. There was a distant rumble that became a louder and louder rumble: something was coming toward us, across the ocean. From miles away, from hundreds and hundreds of miles away it came: a thin white line etched in the glowing blue, and it grew as it approached. The great wave came, and the world rumbled, and I looked up as it reached us: it was taller than trees, than houses, than mind or eyes could hold, or heart could follow."

The first thing that caught my eye is the second sentence. The first and most obvious thing to see is the repetition of "and" in place of using commas in the list. This helps create the effect that a lot of things are going on at once, and the reader feels that in having to see "and" over and over and over (pun intended) again. The waves seem bigger and more powerful in this manner, otherwise, with commas, we'd just be seeing a list of things waves typically do, so why does that matter. However, why I this sentence stood out to me was the choice of words he used. What he did was something I know as an old Latin trick, where the verbal sounds used in a

clause help to bring the reader to the scene at hand. Here, “crashed” and “smacked” both use a ‘short a’ sound. Similar to the sound made when something smacks or crashes into something. We are hearing the waves hit the ground in the words we are reading. Then he goes from “smacked” to “splashed” both carrying a ‘s’. The waves calmed down, we see that with the change in sound, now mimicking how the ocean sounds when there aren’t as many waves and the wind is just moving the water. Then he ends with “retreated”, ending with an ‘r’ similar to the water pulling back into the ocean and taking the sand with it.

Jumping around a little, next thing I picked up on was in the last sentence, “The great wave came, and the world rumbled, and I looked up as it reached us: it was taller than trees, than houses, than mind or eyes could hold, or heart could follow.” He uses a similar technique to the one used in the sentence above, this time dropping ‘and’ altogether. While being polar opposites, used here, it has the same effect. This wave is being described as impossibly big, and the narrator is seemingly struggling to describe it as it is coming. In dropping the ‘and’s’ the sentence is sped up and we are following along the words at a faster pace as this wave is continuing to just grow and grow. It doesn’t become as believable if the narrator is able to take a second to add in a pause in between descriptions of this wave. We do get those pauses at the beginning of the sentence, right before this wave hits. The biggest one coming from the usage of the colon between the two clauses. We have a dramatic pause between the wave appearing and its description, and it’s one that is anticipated because of his wording just before that (“world rumbled”).

We get another pause with a similar effect in the sentence coming before that, “From miles away, from hundreds and hundreds of miles away it came: a thin white line etched in the glowing blue, and it grew as it approached.” Using similar wording, we are left eagerly

anticipating what “it” was that crossed “hundreds and hundreds of miles” to get to where we are standing. The “hundreds and hundreds of miles” get further emphasized in being caught parenthetically between that colon and a comma.

These pauses for dramatic weight are used, once again, in the preceding sentence, “There was a distant rumble that became a louder and louder rumble: something was coming toward us, across the ocean.” There was a rumble, one that is growing, and we are made to wait a moment before finding out what was responsible for this rumble. All of the following pauses we see build up loads of suspense, adding to the time we have to wait to see what it was that was coming from this ocean. The quicker sounding pace in the last sentence, mentioned above, gives us a bigger payoff for having to wait so long and further emphasizes the size and power of this wave in that we had so much time to see it, then none when it finally came.

Between the two of them, I think I can safely say that Gaiman likes to use colons and commas and other techniques to help build suspense for what is to come. Croshaw uses similar pauses as well, but he uses more commas than colons, helping everything move along quicker. But from what we see in the two passages, this serves what each is trying to do. Gaiman is building up suspense for something to come, and he wants to get us to keep reading along in order to find out what this thing is that he’s been teasing at. When it finally does arrive, he speeds the pace up, no longer needing to build up to anything. If he kept it up, it’d be boring. Croshaw gave us the big suspenseful thing in the very first sentence. The pauses he uses are to build up suspense for something dramatic, but on a much smaller and personal scale. Instead of massive waves coming down and shaking the planet, we have a guy trying to have breakfast, but something wrong happens. The biggest delay is in the biggest part of that narrator’s morning, discovering that he has no power in his house. If he used the same pauses that Gaiman used, it

be boring, too slow, and we might not care why the city of Brisbane was covered in man-eating jam. Also, being that *Jam*, is meant to be a comedy/horror novel, it would sound weird using the same kinds of pauses in *Ocean*, a psychological drama.

Along those same lines, Gaiman uses more literary techniques to further enhance the story than Croshaw does. At least in the passages used here, you could just glance at what Gaiman wrote and see two or three things he did. Croshaw, you have to sit down and analyze the words on the page to see what techniques, if any, he used in his story. However, I would argue that that doesn't necessarily make Croshaw a worse writer, the two of them are writing for different audiences. A comedy written with serious wording and beautiful imagery is either going to be lost on most of the audience, or going to take away from the point of the novel, which is to make people laugh. Gaiman is trying to tap into something of the human spirit and something grander than what we know, so the more he does to get the reader thinking, the more likely they are to appreciate the things he is trying to discuss. The two passages themselves might not have been the best examples to use either, the Gaiman piece is from the end of the book, and one would expect things to ramp up considerably from the beginning of the book. The Croshaw one is from the first two paragraphs and shouldn't be written as the high point of the novel.

Another interesting point between the two pieces are the weight placed on the events of import in the two passages. Croshaw mentions the man-eating jam, but doesn't go back to address it. The narrator just goes on with his day and the reader is left confused as to what happened. The man-eating jam is brushed off as non-important and something we will get back to eventually. Gaiman took to building up to what was to come. His narrator's experience isn't

necessarily as important as the event itself, it's mostly there for us to be able to experience what is happening.

Last thing I can point out between the two authors are that Croshaw seems to like using verbals, whereas Gaiman used very few. What I can really pull from that is that Croshaw has more going on, whereas Gaiman is staying focused on one big action. So the narrator from *Jam* is doing a lot of little things in that moment where the one from *Ocean* is just observing a larger event going on around him. For what they were trying to do in the moment, it worked fine. Croshaw's was basically going through his to-do list he does every morning and Gaiman's was experiencing an event he's never witnessed before.

After this analysis, I can say that I have a much greater appreciation for Neil Gaiman's writing than I had previously. With Croshaw, I basically got what I expected going into this, but Gaiman blew me away with all of the things he was doing. And that's just with what I was able to spot, I'm sure if I took more time to really analyze this passage, I'd be able to find a whole lot more than what I mentioned in this paper. If anything, this will give me something to do in my spare time, as I wouldn't mind going and looking at other passages in these books to see if these trends carry throughout their writing, or just happen to fall within these individual passages.



Very nicely done
A

The Grammar Thief

When it comes to the assignment of analyzing interesting grammar, my mind instantly directs itself to the compelling work of Markus Zusak, specifically his work in the incredible novel, The Book Thief. This story is told from a unique point of view, from a character I describe in my mind as an angel of death. Because of this, the narrator has a mysterious, omnipresent quality that intrigued me from the first few broken lines. It is obvious after reading the first page of this novel, that Zusak utilizes a very unique writing style to accurately embody the shadowy narrator he has decided to create. The way he places each sentence and each mark of punctuation adds a cryptic undertone and was chosen with clear intention. Zusak's unconventional usage of grammar is something I thought would be very fun to pick apart. So I decided to select a passage from the novel that has stuck with me. This excerpt is mainly just description, but the images are compiled in such a unique and memorable way that even months after reading it for the first time, I could still feel the energy and see all of the colors.

Here is the excerpt I have decided to analyze. I made sure to include all of the line breaks and recreate the spacing as best as possible. I feel these grammatical and layout decisions are important for any language analysis or interpretation.

"The last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring. In some places, it was burned. There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked across the redness.

Earlier, kids had begun playing hopscotch there, on the street that looked like oil-stained pages. When I arrived, I could still hear the echoes. The feet tapping the roads. The children-voices laughing, and the smiles like salt, but decaying fast.

Then, bombs.

This time, everything was too late.

The sirens. The cuckoo shrieks in the radio. All too late.

Within minutes, mounds of concrete and earth were stacked and piled. The streets were ruptured veins. Blood streamed till it was dried on the road, and the bodies stuck there, like driftwood after the flood.

They were glued down, every last one of them. A packet of seeds.

Was it fate?

Misfortune?

Is that what glued them down like that?

Of course not.

Let's not be stupid.

It probably had more to do with the hurled bombs, thrown down by humans hiding in the clouds.

Yes, the sky was now a devastating, home cooked red. The small German town had been flung apart one more time. Snowflakes of ash fell so lovelily you were tempted to stretch out your tongue to catch them, taste them. Only, they would have scorched your lips. They would have cooked your mouth."

Wow. So there is a lot of interesting decisions being made in this excerpt, but overall, the theme in this writing is concise, simple, but heavy sentences that are often left fragmented or separated. Since there is so much going on, I will continue the analysis by breaking down this piece into chunks and taking a magnifying glass to each of these sections.

"The last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring. In some places, it was burned. There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked across the redness.

This short paragraph opens the chapter. There isn't an extreme amount of playing with the rules of grammar here. However, I do find it interesting how he uses the verbals in the second sentence to describe the soup. Because he only places a comma and then lets the verbals follow the word they describe without any added decoration, it complements the quickly established tone of simplistic, choppy sentences. Next is:

"Earlier, kids had begun playing hopscotch there, on the street that looked like oil-stained pages. When I arrived, I could still hear the echoes. The feet tapping the roads. The children-voices laughing, and the smiles like salt, but decaying fast."

I enjoy the way he structures this first sentence. He places the descriptive prepositional phrase after the word it describes: *"there."* Where is *"there?"* There is *"on the street that looked like oil-stained pages."* He could have placed this phrase in the beginning of the sentence, but choosing to place it where he did not only adds interest, but matches the structure in the previous paragraph. His use of commas adds breaks within sentences without having to necessarily use periods, once again, creating that choppy read which is carried throughout the rest of the paragraph. *"The feet tapping*

the roads,” is a fragmented sentence that was obviously chopped up for a purpose. It provides a continuation of the voice already established. “Tapping” is a verbal, not a main verb, and the sentence overall is an extension of the preceding one. Although, these short sentences do not appeal to the universal rules of grammar, since they are done stylistically and with intention, it does not come across as sloppy, but artistic.

“Then, bombs.”

This fragment only contains two words yet it carries an immense amount of power which I assume was Zusak’s goal. He places a great deal of separation between this phrase and the surrounding prose, creating emphasis. The comma adds even more drama, almost as if dividing the short sentence even further.

“This time, everything was too late.

The sirens. The cuckoo shrieks in the radio. All too late.”

Zusak’s consistency of voice is admirable here. He places the words on the page in a way that creates the drama of the scene he is portraying through such simple sentences. Once again, the comma in the first sentence playfully mimics the more harsh pauses in the sentences that follow. Usually, it is in a writer’s best interest to describe dramatic scenes with concise sentences because they best imitate the rash and terse emotions felt in such a predicament. This technique is what I think Zusak is utilizes throughout most of this piece of interesting description.

“Within minutes, mounds of concrete and earth were stacked and piled. The streets were ruptured veins. Blood streamed till it was dried on the road, and the bodies stuck there, like driftwood after the flood.” (Zusak, 2006 p.12-13)

This paragraph is the first real chunk of complete sentences after the dramatic line breaks that precede. It is within these solid paragraphs that Zusak really piles up the heavy yet eloquently worded description. The paragraph begins with passive voice and then transitions to active voice. This represents the omnipresent eye of the narrator in a beautiful way, almost as if it were a lens, coming into focus, displaying the scene in a more urgent perspective. And again, the commas are here, adding subtle yet necessary pauses to the heavy description.

"They were glued down, every last one of them. A packet of seeds.

Was it fate?

Misfortune?

Is that what glued them down like that?

Of course not.

Let's not be stupid.

It probably had more to do with the hurled bombs, thrown down by humans hiding in the clouds."

In this next section Zusak opens with a sentence in the passive voice, transitioning once again. This time he transitions from the scene at hand to the discussion of more abstract content. The way he organizes the following series of questions in a spaced out list format helps to develop the character of the narrator as well as connect the reader to the devastation being described in this scene. Rhetorical questions help to get the reader thinking and the spaces act as pauses for this provoked thought to take place. The final sentence in this section is like a long windy trail compared to the preceding ones, even though it would appear to be a standard length in most other circumstances. Zusak, however, still uses the comma to break up this

longer sentence near this middle. The comma placed after “bombs” adds emphasis to the same word he had previously drawn attention to in this section. It is interesting to see how the simple placement of one singular comma can alter the mood of an entire sentence as well as the way in which the sentence is read both orally and quietly to oneself. Zusak relies on these commas frequently to preserve the slowly paced read of this dramatic description.

“Yes, the sky was now a devastating, home cooked red. The small German town had been flung apart one more time. Snowflakes of ash fell so lovelily you were tempted to stretch out your tongue to catch them, taste them. Only, they would have scorched your lips. They would have cooked your mouth.”

As seen previously, in the final piece from this section, Zusak separates this detailed depiction in a larger, chunkier paragraph, with fully developed sentences that mildly imitate the structure he has been consistent with thus far. However, Zusak does a bit of shrinking and stretching with his sentence length here, adding a bit of musicality and contrast to the tone, and forcing emphasis on to certain phrases over others. In this sentence: *“Snowflakes of ash fell so lovelily you were tempted to stretch out your tongue to catch them, taste them,”* Most of it is read in all one breath, but the end rounds out with a bit of repetition, separated by of course, a comma. The last two sentences in this paragraph are also interesting because they could make sense as one long sentence, but are left separate to create that repetitive effect. He could have written “Only, they would have scorched your lips and cooked your mouth.” Instead of making it a compound sentences, which would derail his previously established sentence pattern, he breaks them up.

Overall, Zusak switches in and out of passive and active voice, creating a hyper focus on certain details over others. He also opts for a more concise sentence, but these sentences contain very heavy content, carrying with them just as much or even more power than long winded and descriptive sentences. This consistency of sentence structure is what creates the voice of that “angel of death” narrator. It is very interesting to see how characterization can be developed through tone, which is ultimately the result of stylistic grammar choices.

The choppy sentences also help create that foreboding atmosphere of the scene and reinforces the cryptic voice of the narrator. The narrator is quickly developed as this all-knowing presence watching from above and the tone for the entire novel is set. Zusak is very inventive and creative with his use of grammar. The way he places his words on the page, provide for dramatic pauses and helps to build emphasis around certain words or phrases. Overall, I really enjoy the way Zusak utilized grammar in this novel to develop the abstract character of his narrator in a tangible way. His ability to control the pace of scenes through grammar is admirable. He is able to slow everything down, making the reader feel as if they are experiencing everything in that moment in slow motion. Simplicity is an innovative approach to description, but also a very effective and impressionable one. This concept is something I would love to attempt to recreate in my own writing. But as I’ve learned, less words doesn’t equate to less difficulty. Pulling off choppy, simplistic, rule-bending grammar is a challenge. Kudos to Markus Zusak.

References

Zusak, M. (2006). *The Book Thief*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.