

All Style and No Substance?: Teaching the Art of Imitation

Molly Katz

The Question: What do students learn from mimicking another author’s style? How can we help make such an exercise more useful?

Background:

Stanley Fish, in his book *How To Write A Sentence*, suggests that the best way to learn to write is to imitate the sentences of literary writers—Anthony Burgess, Mark Twain, and Hemingway, for example. But is he right?

My study observed the learning outcomes of a particular sequence of imitative writing assignments in order to determine where learning occurs and what students gain from these assignments.

Activity 1: I asked students to write a paragraph in the style of John Updike. I told them that such an exercise was called a pastiche, and provided them with a brief description of that form, but otherwise gave them no guidance.

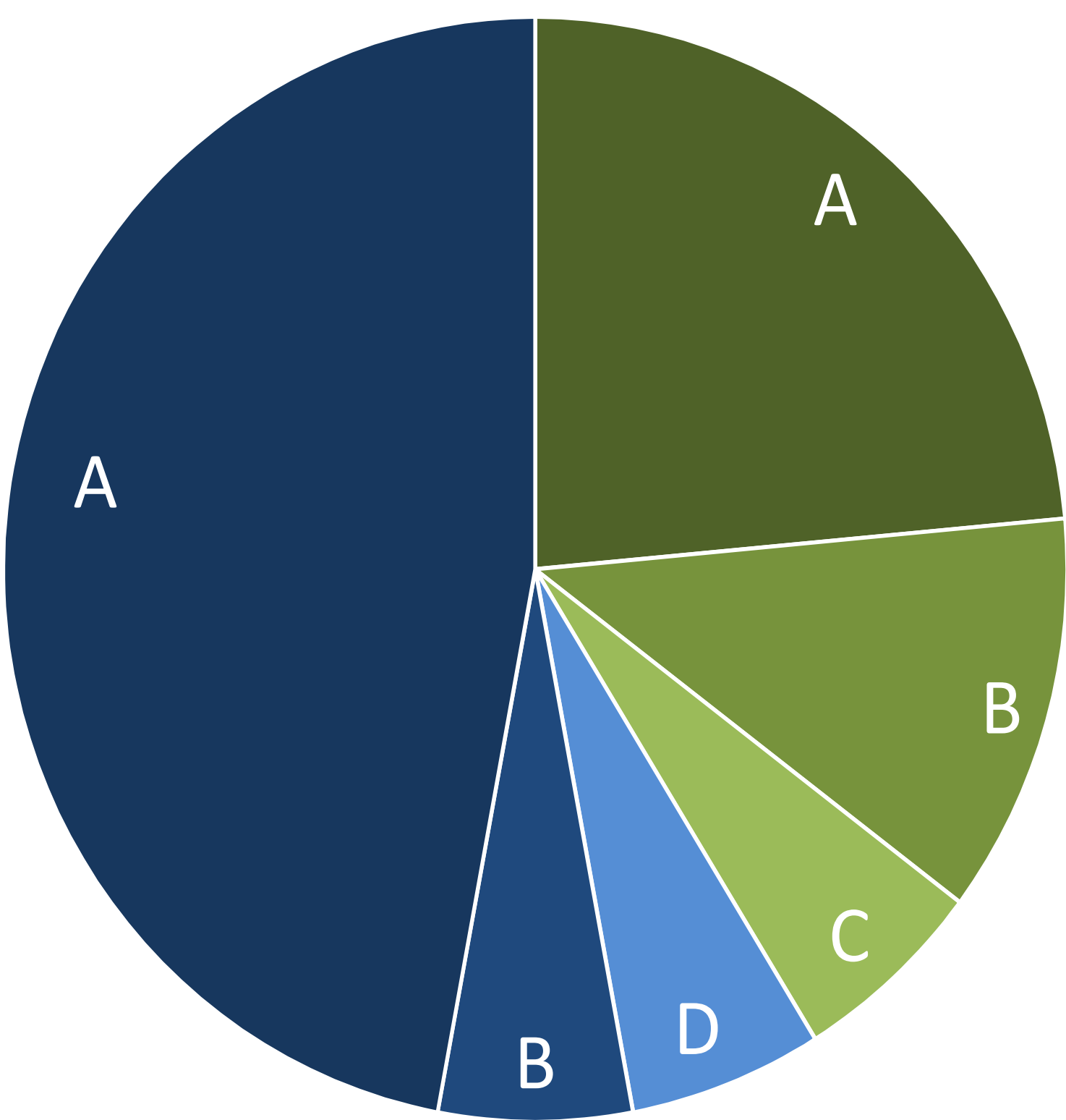
Activity 2: I asked students to pick a sentence from John Updike’s *Gertrude And Claudius* and write their own like it, trying to preserve the same punctuation and the same pattern of parts of speech. I provided a model both of a sentence and a rewrite. After we finished sharing our sentences, we talked about Updike’s word choice, and what they had noticed about the types of words he used.

Activity 3: I provided students with a handout that explained the difference between right, left, and middle branching sentences. After we worked our way through the examples on the handout, I asked them to find an example of one of the sentence types in Updike’s *Gertrude and Claudius*.

Activity 4: I asked students to write a second paragraph in the style of John Updike, keeping our conversations about syntax and diction in mind.

Activity 5: I provided students with eight paragraphs, written by four students. Four of the paragraphs were written before the activities, and four were written after. I did not tell them which ones were which. I asked them to answer the following question:

What, for you, makes for an effective imitation of Updike’s style? Choose the paragraph from the selection below that you think best captures the essence of Updike’s style. Explain your reasoning. In order to make your case, I expect you will quote from Gertrude and Claudius as well as from the paragraph you choose.



The above chart shows which paragraphs (out of 8) the 17 students in my class chose as **the best imitations** when writing their essays. **Blue wedges** indicate paragraphs written **before** our exercises. **Green wedges** indicate paragraphs written **after** our exercises. The **letters** indicate **which student** wrote which paragraph.

Interpreting the Data:

- Students, when asked to select the imitation that most effectively mimicked Updike’s style, did *not* prefer the imitations that had been completed after our exercises.
- One single student’s writing was the overwhelming favorite, with 8 students choosing her first imitation, and 4 choosing her second.

Student responses to the exercises:

- When asked to complete a brief reflection about our exercises a two trends emerged:
1. Students would have liked to learn more about diction and other non-syntactic elements of Updike’s style.
 2. Students felt they lacked sufficient guidance to imitate Updike’s style. Some expressed a desire to have a specific paragraph to imitate, while others wanted other works by Updike on hand to help them form their opinions.

What students said about the “favorite” paragraph:

Students who chose “Paragraph A” overwhelmingly attributed its similarity to Updike’s writing to both its syntactic and its thematic complexity. Notably, when they discussed the paragraph’s syntax, they used the key terms we had learned in our exercises, as the first quotation illustrates:

“Our peer includes the features of long and detailed narrations, large words-- sometimes unnecessarily verbose in thought-- and complicated left, right and middle branching sentences.”

“Updike-style details are used to flesh out the viewpoint character, the object of his desire and enmity, and his complicated assortment of feelings for her.”

“To imitate Updike’s style of long sentences that cannot be broken into simpler ones effectively, the writer’s sentence must contain related ideas that build on each other and relationships that will be contorted if broken up.”

Takeaways:

The exercises did not seem to improve students’ ability to imitate John Updike. What they did seem to improve was students’ ability to talk about and analyze their peers’ imitations with confidence.

Instructors wishing to implement an assignment sequence similar to mine might include an activity that deals explicitly with John Updike’s patterns of word choice. Such exercises might include asking students to generate and then discuss word clouds generated from the text in question, or create “found poems.”

Topics to explore further:

These results suggest that perhaps the exercises that teach us to be better readers and critics do not teach us to be better writers. The extent to which learning to analyze writing teaches us to write would be a rich topic for further exploration.

Giving students the vocabulary to discuss syntax (left, middle, right branching) seemed to give them confidence and make them excited to talk about their writing. The matter of how best to explain and define style itself for students in a way that would achieve a similar result is worth pursuing.