

10-1-1965

Round Robin

Dorothy E. Smith

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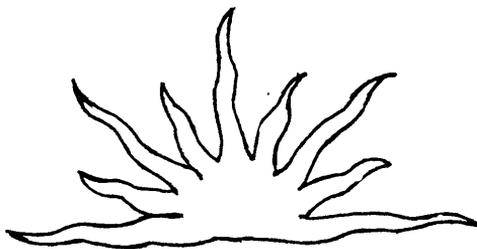
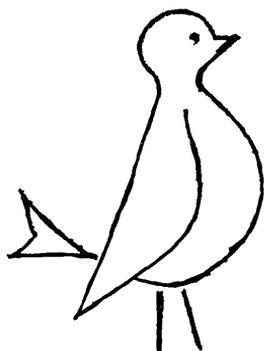


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Recommended Citation

Smith, D. E. (1965). Round Robin. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 6 (1).
Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol6/iss1/5

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ROUND ROBIN

Dorothy E. Smith, Editor

The expert reader is also a master hand at recognizing the various components of a sentence. This ability is a vital factor in his expertness. Since this is true, should not students be given training in this aspect of reading? Read what Louis Foley, an English teacher and the author of many scholarly articles, has to say on the subject.

Dear Editor:

Recently a college professor was quoted in a newspaper as saying that "meaningless diagramming of sentences" should be eliminated from school curricula. In my opinion this suggestion is not grounded in wisdom.

The question is of course begged at the start by calling such activity "meaningless." No doubt it can be so for people who do not give it much thought. There are those of us, however, who view diagramming sentences as at least *one* rather effective device to help students become more clearly aware of how our speech-patterns hold together to make sense.

When I was a boy in grade-school, we did a good deal of diagramming. One teacher whom I remember particularly was extremely expert at it and enthusiastic about it. The class as a whole found it as interesting and enjoyable as any kind of exercise we ever had in the classroom. I think we would have cheerfully challenged anyone to come up with a sentence—no matter how complicated, if correct and well constructed—that we could not dispose of completely according to the system. It is my conviction that that experience gave us something valuable and probably as durable as any of the things that one can learn in school. The overwhelming majority of my classmates never

entered high school, let alone college, but I believe most of them realized things about sentence-structure that too many people who have missed such training never do thoroughly understand.

Recently I tried a little experiment in a college class in composition. With no leading questions, no hint as to what sort of answer was expected, I asked them to write an explanation of how they had learned what they knew about grammar and sentence-structure. A clear majority testified that they had especially profited from diagramming. A typical comment was:

“Learning grammar can be fun . . . if one learns it the way I did, . . . by sentence diagramming. The diagramming of sentences is not only interesting, but is very helpful in teaching one grammar.”

Looking back upon their earlier instruction through a perspective of four or more years, these college students, well prepared for higher education, certainly do not consider “meaningless” the training they had in diagramming sentences.

To be sure, this teaching device has its limitations. There are various phenomena, not without importance in the construction of sentences, which it is hardly capable of showing realistically. For instance, an adverbial element which would be formally disposed of as “modifying the verb” may actually apply rather to the entire predicate or to the sentence as a whole. A so-called final or dangling “preposition” may really be part of what amounts to a compound verb, representing a unified idea. So far as the thought is concerned, often an adjective modifies a noun not directly but as it is already modified by one or more other adjectives. These are merely examples of sorts of things which diagramming is not sufficiently flexible to handle with finality. Nevertheless it can bring out graphically the basic patterns which one needs to see clearly first of all. As a relatively modern expedient, it replaced the old-fashioned exercise of “parsing,” something which could not be performed intelligently without already understanding the plan of the sentence as a whole. By making this plan clearly graphic, diagramming rendered parsing very easy and in fact unnecessary because it was unequivocally implied in the form of the diagram.

The late Sir Winston Churchill has left eloquent testimony of his indebtedness to a Mr. Somervell who taught him English. “He taught it as no one else ever taught it. Not only did we learn English parsing thoroughly, but we also continually practiced English analysis.”

This method of “analysis” was just another way of working for the grasp of structure which is the aim of diagraming. “He took a fairly long sentence and broke it up into its components by means of black, red, blue, and green inks. Subject, verb, object, relative clauses, conditional clauses, conjunctive and disjunctive clauses—each had its color and its bracket. It was a kind of drill. We did it almost daily.” There was no doubt in Sir Winston’s mind that that was how he “got into his bones the essential structure” of ordinary sentences, and this he considered “a noble thing.” Such, then, was the value of a training which amounted to “diagraming,” in the view of one of the greatest masters of English of all time.

We might add that as a realistic and far-sighted statesman he was no despiser of “tradition.” He would, we may well believe, have subscribed to the anonymous aphorism: “A people without tradition are like the mule; they have no pride of ancestry and no hope of progeny.”

Sincerely,
Louis Foley