



The Evolution of Imitation: Building Your Style

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Craig A. Meyer

OVERVIEW

This chapter focuses on incorporating imitation practices into a student's writing toolbox. By encouraging students to look more rhetorically at writing through imitation, they learn to recognize that language is more dynamic, and they can approach writing tasks with more contemplative thought instead of as a dreaded task. Through the use of structural and contextual imitation, students gain more insight into how sentences create meaning, how they can be changed, and how the decision-making processes relate to putting certain writing elements in certain locations for specific effects. While this article briefly touches on plagiarism as being distinct from imitation, students should recognize that imitation is not mindlessly copying, but mindfully understanding the rationale and effect of sentence structure, variety, and placement. They also learn how words form meaning within a sentence and, by extension, paragraphs and the overall paper. Imitation helps student writers realize that the more models, authors, and examples they can imitate, the more diverse and expressive their writing will become. Each time they understand how and why another author's sentence does what it does, they can use that insight in their own writing, which also increases their confidence.

Think for a moment on how you have learned most of the things you know.* Sometimes you learned by reading—perhaps from a textbook in history class. Sometimes you learned by doing something, like riding a bike. Sometimes you watched someone else and copied their

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movements, such as when you learned to write the alphabet. Oftentimes, we learn by mimicking or imitating others. Consider how you might catch yourself acting like a parent or close loved one—in essence, you are imitating that behavior. Your first reaction might be negative: “I don’t want to imitate anybody!” And I think most people can understand that feeling. We want to be original. However, if we can acknowledge how much we can learn from other people’s writing, then we can incorporate their experience and talent into our writing. In other words, we don’t need to reinvent the wheel. Here, we will learn how to imitate another’s writing and adapt it to our style, thus enhancing our own style to be more flexible and durable across writing tasks.

Learning by imitation gets a bad reputation even though we do it a lot in our lives. Imitation has mistakenly been linked to plagiarism. As you know, plagiarism is the copying of another person’s work and not crediting them with it or taking credit for a piece of writing you did not write. For example, if you purchase a paper online and turn it in for a grade in a class—that’s plagiarism. Likewise, if you copy a paragraph from a website and don’t cite it, that, too, is plagiarism. Imitation is more complex than mindlessly copying down someone’s words. Think of imitation as having a teacher that encourages you to figure out the hows and the whys something is the way it is—how to break it down, put it back together, and learn from that process to enhance your abilities.

To help illustrate, consider musicians. They listen to a lot of different types of music and each piece they listen to impacts their overall musical knowledge and experience. This influences how they create their own music. For example, I recall an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in which Data, the android (one who supposedly cannot create, just imitate; in fact, an imitation himself!), plays the violin. Captain Picard is called away and misses the concert but gets a recording of it. Later, this scene takes place between Picard and Data; they discuss Data’s violin playing:

Picard: The good doctor was kind enough to provide me with a recording of your concert. Your performance shows feeling.

Data: As I have recently reminded others, sir, I have no feeling.

Picard: It’s hard to believe. Your playing is quite beautiful.

Data: Strictly speaking, sir, it is not my playing. It is a precise imitation of the techniques of Jascha Heifetz and Trenka Bronken.

Picard: Is there nothing of Data in what I'm hearing? You see, you chose the violinists. Heifetz and Bronken have radically different styles, different techniques, and, yet, you combined them successfully. ("Ensigns")

Data believes that the imitation and combination of two others is still an imitation in the strictest sense; however, as the scene makes clear, Data, by combining two "radically different styles," has created *his own style*. Without the imitation and interpretation of those two, he could not and would not have generated his own style; this is the power of imitation. That creation, then, becomes much more than mere imitation; it *evolves*. The evolution of prose is no longer an imitation of one, but of the combination of many to create your own. Although the scene depicted above refers to only two violinists, Data no doubt has heard dozens of violinists. Each one has left a mark on Data's performance and thus made *his* performance unique. Therefore, by understanding how others put words together and the style or voice of ourselves, we uncover a new set of procedures, styles, and possibilities, which then cease to be imitation but creation.

Our goal is not to *only* use imitation, but to consider it one of the tools of learning—a powerful tool, but *a* tool nonetheless. Yet imitation, as one of those tools, is different because it focuses on the improvement and empowerment of the writer through mimicry of another's style, voice, or pattern—not necessarily their actual words. Some time ago, I was reading *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser, and I hit a short section on imitation. Zinsser believes we must learn by imitation, and although Zinsser was a master writer, he continued to be influenced by other writers because all writers can continue to grow *as* writers. Each author a writer takes as an influence helps the writer grow and make stronger connections to words and phrases. Zinsser gives his take on imitation:

Never hesitate to imitate another writer. Imitation is part of the creative process for anyone learning an art or a craft. Bach and Picasso didn't spring full-blown as Bach and Picasso; they needed models. This is especially true of writing. Find the best writers in the fields that interest you and read their work aloud. Get their voice and taste into your ear—their attitude toward language. Don't worry that by imitating them you'll lose your own voice and your own identity. Soon enough you will shed those skins and become who you are supposed to become. (235-36)

What he acknowledges is that as you gain more experience, you'll develop more of your own strategies to deal with the numerous problems you'll encounter when writing.

Here's our plan: we are going to look at a few pieces of writing and see what is happening so we might adapt it in our writing. We won't be copying or simply right-clicking to get a synonym, but learning from the style to improve our own. This doesn't mean we won't on occasion use some of the same phrases or words, because we will. But in doing so, we will be tacitly adjusting our understanding of how words make sentences, how sentences make paragraphs, and how paragraphs make papers. As our understanding of language interaction grows by looking at more examples, our style will become broader. Remember, writing is a continual process. We won't ever be perfect and we will need to continue working on our style by reading others and seeing how they make words work for them, then adapt that experience into our style.

We are going to consider two types of imitation: structural and contextual. First, structural imitation is mimicking the actual sentence structure of an author. We carefully look at how they put the words together to generate meaning and how sentences can be shaped to provide certain meanings. This form of imitation allows us to increase the variety of sentences we can utilize. Second, contextual imitation relates more to the style of a selected piece. By considering what, where, and why an author chooses to do something, we can understand the effect on the reader and why that choice was made. Here, we discuss both because both will add to our writing toolbox. Remember, our goal is to learn from other authors as we continue to improve our own writing and build confidence in our ability to handle writing tasks.

STRUCTURAL IMITATION

Let's take a look at structural imitation. A writer creates a sentence such as, *The windowpane protects me from the brutal world and its dangers*. Obviously, if you were not the writer, but copy that sentence exactly—it will never be *your* sentence. It will be the original author's sentence. Its generation or its reality was brought forth by that person. However, by imitating the structure, the impression of the sentence, we learn to imitate a slice of its original usefulness; it is this use that carries over into structural imitation, such as, *The explorer guided me away from the cliff's edge and certain death*. Even though I created both sentences, they are not identical. Yes, they have some of the same structures. Yet, the second sentence, even with my

attempt to make them equal, is not the same. Imitation, then, in its purest form, is a new creation from an old model.

To help illustrate imitative sentence structure, let's look at some sentences below. You can also pick sentences from your favorite authors and imitate them for more practice.

- <Model> Writing with *real voice* has the power to make you pay attention and understand—the words go deep. (Elbow 299)
- <Imitation> Movies with great actors have the influence to make us believe and take part—the drama becomes real.
- <Model> I stared at the speaker in mute astonishment. (Poe 154)
- <Imitation> I smiled at my girlfriend in silent acceptance.
- <Model> In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. (Carson 1)
- <Imitation> On stage, strings and woodwinds and drums created a harmony of sound that filled and floated through the auditorium into the recesses of my ears.

In looking at these sentences, we probably notice patterns. Patterns are particularly useful and have been used to help many students. In their writing textbook, *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein provide what they call “templates” that give us a number of these patterns. You can use these templates too, and, as you gain more experience, you can adjust them to fit your own style. Below are several examples from Graff and Birkenstein:

- While I understand the impulse to _____, my own view is _____. (309)
- Although X does not say so directly, she apparently assumes that _____. (311)
- X claims that _____. (312)
- The essence of X's argument is that _____. (314)
- By focusing on _____, X overlooks the deeper problem of _____. (314)
- X surely is right about _____ because, as she may not be aware, recent studies have shown that _____. (315)
- Although I agree with X up to a point, I cannot accept his overall conclusion that _____. (315)
- Yet some readers may challenge the view that _____. (317)
- My discussion of X is in fact addressing the larger matter of _____. (320)

These templates are more academic in nature than the earlier ones, and as you become more comfortable writing academic prose, you can adapt these to serve you better and more in *your* style and voice. For example, if I imitate the last template, but make it more in my voice, I might write, “This paper’s discussion of X’s argument focuses on the larger issue of _____.” It’s not a copy of the template, but you can see how it, more or less, leads us in the same direction. The point is other sentences give us a foundation on which to build.

These types of exercises drive us to explore how words work together and form a sentence and how that sentence works to create meaning. Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, in *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, write that “imitation exercises ask you to try new approaches and to innovate within those approaches” (29). Indeed, imitation *becomes* innovation. One does not build star-shaped houses; they typically build square-shaped ones, partly because there is an abundance of models to mimic and they seem to be the most functional, but that doesn’t mean they are all the same.

CONTEXTUAL IMITATION

Let’s move to the other type of imitation. Contextual imitation focuses on the meaning and the many interpretations of that meaning. What a sentence’s meaning is can be written several different ways. As we will see in the following example, every variation of a sentence can create new understandings and lead us into new directions. Take Desiderius Erasmus, who was a teacher in the 1500s. He provided his students with a simple sentence: *Your letter pleased me greatly*. Simple enough, right? How many different ways do you think you could rewrite that sentence?

Five? Ten? Thirty?

Erasmus generated 195! Some of his examples include:

- Your letter heaped joy upon me.
- After your note was handed to me, my spirit quite bubbled over with joy.
- I conceived a wonderful delight from your pages.
- All else is utterly repellent compared to your letter.
- At the sight of your letter the frown fled from my mind’s brow.
- How delighted I was to read your letter!
- The happiness occasioned by your communication is greater than I can describe.

- I never set eyes on anything more gladly than your letter.
- Like clover to the bee, willow leaves to goats, honey to the bear, even so are your letter to me.
- Your epistle exudes nothing but joy. (*Collected Works* 349-353)

Each one of these examples is a variation of that original sentence; the context is what we are imitating. Certainly, we can assume that some of these might be unclear or even painful to read, but we can also assume that the context of how each one can be read is also slightly different. Erasmus is taking the original sentence and working through nearly two hundred variations, and in doing so, another sentence presents itself that can be used as a slight variation from the original. As we consider these samples, we see that the length is different, the verbs are different, even the term for *letter* varies. These variations provide more nuance and insight into the meaning of each one—even though, basically, they mean the same thing. By practicing this type of exercise, we flex our sentence-making muscles.

The other aspects of contextual imitation refer to the where and why authors make certain decisions in a piece of writing. To help explain some of this rationale, Donna Gorrell, who also champions the use of imitation, illustrates how those that use imitation are speeding up the process of learning. She explains that it demonstrates how other writers, when encountering a similar textual concern, find a way to solve the problem (Gorrell 55). In this way, instead of the tedious and time-consuming “[t]rial-and-error writing,” we see how others handle a writing problem (Gorrell 55).

In what follows (see figure 1), we have an excerpt from a short creative nonfiction piece. As we look at the piece, focus on where the author is deciding to *do* certain things—the comments along the side offer some guidance to help us along. He is describing a baseball game during, what we learn is, a critical moment: the last inning, the author’s team is up by one run, and he’s the catcher. We pick up the action with an intimidating and athletic player on first base—called by the author “big boy”—and a batter having let pass two pitches:

This newest batter was about my size and build with a Louisville Slugger in his hands. Every player knows that a Slugger is the bat of champions. He tapped his cleats with the mystical but then readied his body to smack one beyond the fence. The first pitch he let go; it was a little outside and low. I could tell this was no ordinary moment, the crowd had hushed and I could feel tension in the air. I cautiously tossed it back to the pitcher. The second pitch was right on the money but he didn't bite on that one either. As I was kneeling back down after throwing the ball back, he deepened the trench beneath his right foot with his cleats, kicking dirt on my plate. **GAME ON. Nobody but nobody kicks dirt on my plate; I shot back up ready to confront the transgressor. The umpire yelped, "Time!" and showed his backside to my teammates as he swept off the plate. Order was restored.**

I knelt back down and got ready to receive fastballs and curveballs. As the next pitch came, I saw the Louisville Slugger drawn back and begin to swing. The bat hit the ball with a crushing blow that sent it to my old homeland of left field. The runner on first took off like a rocket. The outfield was just getting a handle on the ball as the runner whipped around second base. The third base coach was yelling, "GO, GO, GO!" to big boy as he neared third. The outfielder heaved the baseball toward me with I am sure everything he had. The ball bounced once and I caught it—solid. With the ball in mitt, I threw off my helmet and facemask. The runner had just rounded third and his coach in the dugout screamed "Bow him over, bow him over!" I clenched my teeth.

I planted myself in front of my plate to defend it. As I tightened the grip of the ball, I could feel the stitches through the leather of my outfield glove. I looked into his eyes and he into mine, we both had an uncertainty, who was going to win? His mouth was open sucking in air, the crowd was still crying out, but I did not listen to them anymore. I widened my stance to cover

more ground and lowered my left shoulder ready to receive whatever he had to offer. I took a deep breath and held it. As I waited, I could hear every crunch of his feet on the dirt mixed with the tightened pounding of my heart deep in my chest. Below my armpit, sweat ran down tempting me to laugh by its tickling gesture. I would have none of it. His arms rose as he began to dive headfirst into me like a linebacker in football. **Big boy plowed into me like a tsunami hitting the beach. I could only hope that I held firm. His blow sent me off to the side onto my right elbow; we went down side by side, lying face to face on the fine gravel surface. Dust covered my tongue and clouded my vision. I felt dizzy.**

I did not know if I had stopped the run or not. My adversary jumped up and began to walk off to his dugout, as if nothing had happened. His face was expressionless, as if he got the run, but did not want to rub it in my face. **A look of despair crossed my face as I realized I may not have stopped him. After several confused seconds, I rolled over to look at the umpire and he yelled with all he had, "OUT!" The crowd celebrated.**

Commented [CAM1]: This short end summarizes the entire paragraph; it shows that within the paragraph, there was disorder, but with the past tense, we see now it was restored.

Commented [CAM2]: Here the author has his current position as catcher to his previous position in the outfield.

Commented [CAM3]: This active use of the verb increases tension and heightens the action.

Commented [CAM4]: The tension of the paragraph, as we see here, will carry over into the next paragraph with another short, powerful sentence.

Commented [CAM5]: Here, as in the coming sentence, we see the pace dramatically slowed down to increase, once again, the tension set up by the end of the last paragraph. The author is slowing it down to increase one-tension too.

Commented [CAM6]: This reality of a distraction is quickly dismissed and heightens our focus on the incoming player, which enhances the readers need for something to happen.

Commented [CAM7]: This vivid image of a massive force hitting a stationary object helps balance out this paragraph from the earlier anticipation.

Commented [CAM8]: After the collision, the pace returns to a slow, methodic one that is set up with details and the conclusion, again, summarizes the paragraph and sets up the next.

Commented [CAM9]: With the dizziness of the collision and new confusion of the score, our author is setting us up for a big win, or a big failure.

Commented [CAM10]: Although not the end of the piece, this selection ends with a short sentence that gives a needed conclusion to the action of the preceding paragraphs. Short and powerful.

Fig. 1. Image of essay with marginal comments explaining some of the writer's rhetorical choices. Source: Craig A. Meyer, "Finding My Team."

This author, as we see by the comments on the right, decided to create almost a mini story at the end of each paragraph. This is a powerful technique (and one you can imitate). Think of it like this: imagine going to a

movie that is two hours long. The first 110 minutes are horrible. You consider walking out but your friend insists that you stay, and she has the car keys. So you stay and suffer. But the last ten minutes feature the best piece of cinematography you've ever witnessed; it's exciting—these ten minutes of the movie bring everything together and ends with an unforeseen twist that you find brilliant and unforgettable.

As you're walking out to the car, someone asks, "So, what did you think of it?" What might you say? Still charged by the ending, maybe you explain how great it was, even though most of the movie was rubbish—the ending leaves the impression. In this baseball piece, the author wants to give us an impression at the end of each paragraph, and while you may not remember the details of the paragraph, you probably remember those short, powerful sentences at the end. That's the power of a strong ending. This technique of ending paragraphs with short, powerful sentences has just been added to your toolbox—you can imitate the technique to enhance your own writing.

In studying several authors or samples, we learn from each one's strengths and weaknesses. Imitation is more than just copying down a selection of writing—it's digging into the prose, pulling it apart, and understanding *why* it works the way that it does. More importantly, other scholars teach us *how they* write, *how they* combine words, phrases, paragraphs, and *how they* handle the writing problems they encounter. *Then*, we practice and transfer that understanding to our *own* prose. These exercises do not take over our writing; they become part of it and make it stronger. Just like Data, we can take radically different styles to develop our own style. The learning process derived from imitation takes time and dedication. Like many things, the process becomes easier with practice and persistence. Take the Erasmus example again; imagine writing a hundred different ways of telling someone you enjoyed their letter. Of course, that would take time and really focusing on the task at hand—it would not be easy. Yet, with each attempt to create a new version, something changes in us constructing it, and in that process, we stretch a little more outside the confines of the original sentence. It is this stretching where *imitative* learning takes place and it is how we grow as writers.

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TEACHER RESOURCES FOR THE EVOLUTION OF IMITATION: BUILDING YOUR STYLE BY CRAIG A. MEYER

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

Authors have used imitation for centuries as a tool to improve their writing. This chapter focuses on using imitation to encourage students to look more closely at readings and learn to better explain how specific words, sentence structures, and sentence placement affects reading, which transfers over to how students write. As students practice imitation, they are gaining vital experience in flexing their sentence-making muscles and trying out various placements of prose that will improve their own writing. Through doing these, they come to realize that writing is more dynamic and allows for their own voice and style to come out.

While this chapter could be used at any time during a first-year composition (FYC) course, the earlier it is used, I think, the more practical use students will take away from it. To better engage students, ask them to bring in a favorite book or an academic article they thought was well written. These writings can easily be incorporated into the discussion of this chapter. Students can use them to practice imitation, which can then easily lead into a meaningful discussion about the differences between plagiarism and imitation. Near the end of the lesson, encourage students to discuss what they learned and how imitating an author's style will aid them in their own writing, while not sacrificing their own voice and style. The chapter also provides imitation exercises for students to do either as a class, in small groups, or on their own.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways can imitation help improve your writing?
2. How is imitation different than plagiarism?
3. Name a few authors you've read. Describe their style as best you can. Then, go look and see how accurate you were. Then, look carefully at their style. Write down some examples of how you may be able to imitate the writing through structural and contextual ways of imitation.
4. Compare one assignment with other class members, pick out similar sentence structures or ways of explaining information. Discuss the patterns and why they are similar. What do you think led to

this similarity? How are the sentence patterns operating to drive the paragraph? The essay?

5. As a group, create a sentence (like Erasmus's) and generate as many possible variations. How are the variations similar? Different? What are the advantages in being able to present a sentence or group of sentences in many different ways?
6. As a group or a class, what other techniques could you learn from or imitate from the baseball selection?