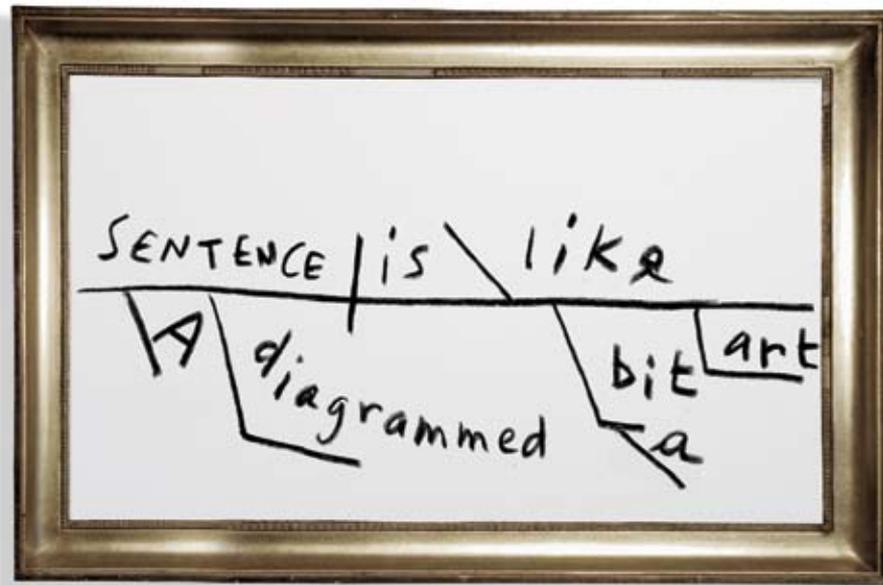


A Picture of Language



BY KITTY BURNS FLOREY

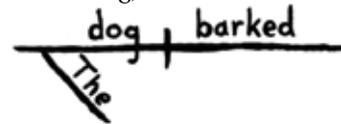
Diagramming sentences is one of those lost skills like darning socks that no one seems to miss. When it was introduced in an 1877 text called *Higher Lessons in English* by Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg, it swept through American public schools like the measles, embraced by teachers as the way to reform students who were engaged in (to take Henry Higgins slightly out of context) “the cold-blooded murder of the English tongue.” By promoting the beautifully logical rules of syntax, diagramming would root out evils like “him and me went” and “I ain’t got none,” until everyone wrote like Ralph Waldo Emerson, or at least James Fenimore Cooper.*

Even in my own youth, many years after 1877, diagramming was serious business. I learned it in the sixth grade from Sister Bernadette.

Sister Bernadette: I can still see her, a tiny nun with a sharp pink nose, confidently drawing a dead-straight horizontal line

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like a highway across the blackboard, flourishing her chalk in the air at the end of it, her veil flipping out behind her as she turned back to the class. *We begin*, she said, *with a straight line*. And then, in her firm and saintly script, she put words on the line, a noun and a verb—probably something like *dog barked*. Between the words she drew a short vertical slash, bisecting the line. Then she drew a road—a short country lane—that forked off at an angle under the word *dog*, and on it she wrote *The*.



That was it: subject, predicate, and the little modifying article that civilized the sentence—all of it made into a picture that was every bit as clear and informative as an actual portrait of a beagle in midwoof. The thrilling part was that this was a picture not of the animal but of the words that stood for the animal and its noises. It was a representation of something that was both concrete (we could hear the words if we said them aloud, and they

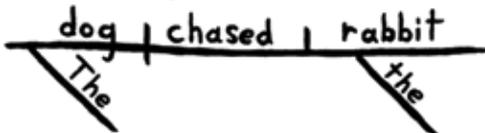
*I’m thinking here of Mark Twain’s famous and still highly entertaining essay, “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses,” in which Twain concludes that “in the restricted space of two-thirds of a page, Cooper has scored 114 literary offenses out of a possible 115. It breaks the record.” But Wilkie Collins called Cooper “the greatest artist in the domain of romantic fiction in America.”



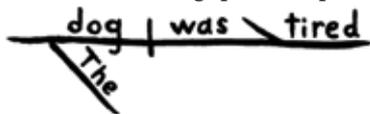
conveyed an actual event) and abstract (the spoken words were invisible, and their sounds vanished from the air as soon as they were uttered). The diagram was the bridge between a dog and the description of a dog. It was a bit like art, a bit like mathematics. It was much more than words uttered, or words written on a piece of paper: it was a picture of language.

I was hooked. So, it seems, were many of my contemporaries. Among the myths that have attached themselves to memories of being educated in the '50s is the notion that activities like diagramming sentences (along with memorizing poems and adding long columns of figures without a calculator) were draggy and monotonous. I thought diagramming was fun, and most of my friends who were subjected to it look back with varying degrees of delight. Some of us were better at it than others, but it was considered a kind of treat, a game that broke up the school day. You took a sentence, threw it against the wall, picked up the pieces, and put them together again, slotting each word into its pigeonhole. When you got it right, you made order and sense out of what we used all the time and took for granted: sentences. Those ephemeral words didn't just fade away in the air but became chiseled in stone—yes, this is a sentence, this is what it's made of, this is what it looks like, a chunk of English you can see and grab onto.

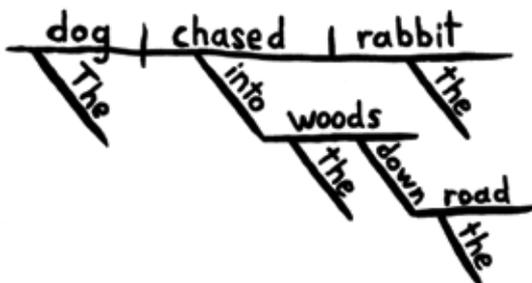
As we became more proficient, the tasks got harder. There was great appeal in the Shaker-like simplicity of sentences like *The dog chased the rabbit* (subject, predicate, direct object) with their plain, no-nonsense diagrams:



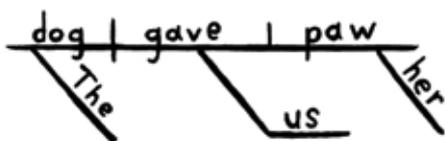
But there were also lovable subtleties, like the way the line that set off a predicate adjective slanted back toward the subject it referred to, like a signpost or a pointing finger:



Or the thorny rosebush created by diagramming a prepositional phrase modifying another prepositional phrase:

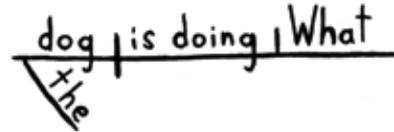


Or the elegant absence of the preposition with an indirect object, indicated by a short road with no house on it:

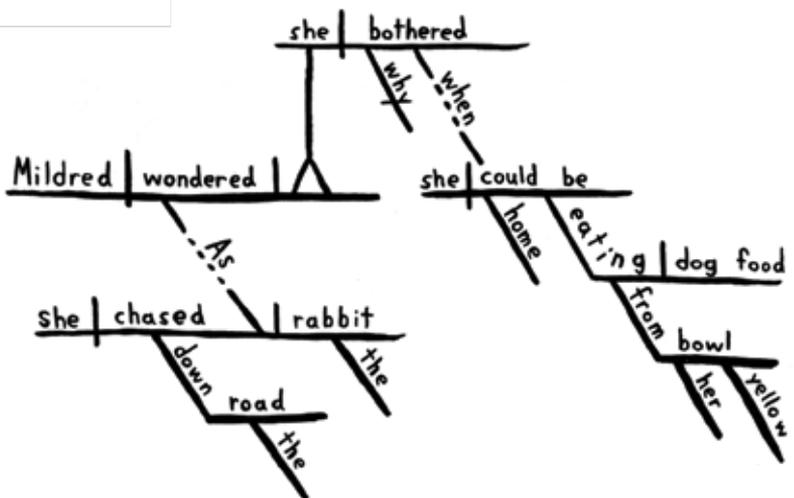


The missing preposition—in this case *to*—could also be indicated by placing it on that road with parentheses around it, but this always seemed to me a clumsy solution, right up there with explaining a pun.

Questions were a special case: for diagramming, they had to be turned inside out, the way a sock has to be eased onto a foot: *What is the dog doing?* transformed into the more dramatic: *The dog is doing what?*

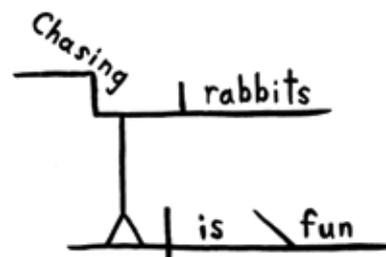


Mostly we diagrammed sentences out of a grammar book, but sometimes we were assigned the task of making up our own, taking pleasure in coming up with wild Proustian wanderings that—kicking and screaming—had to be corralled, harnessed, and made to trot in neat rows into the barn.



We hung those sentences out like a wash, wrote them like lines of music, arranged them on a connecting web of veins and arteries until we understood every piece of them. We could see for ourselves the difference between *who* and *whom*. We knew what an adverb was, and we knew where in a sentence it went, and why it went there.

And we knew that gerunds looked like nouns but were really verbs because they could take a direct object:



Part of the fun of diagramming sentences was that it didn't matter what they said. The dog could bark, chew gum, play chess—in the world of diagramming, sentences weren't about meaning so much as they were about subject, predicate, object, and their various dependents or modifiers. All you had to do was

get the diagram right—the meaning was secondary. And for a bunch of 11- and 12-year-olds, there was a certain wacky charm to that idea.

* * *

Diagramming has lost much of the cachet it used to claim in education circles when I was in school. Sometime in the '60s, it nearly came to a dead stop. But, like pocket watches and Gilbert & Sullivan operas, the practice persists, alternately trashed and cheered by linguists and grammarians. It's sometimes used in English as a second language courses, and it's making a small comeback in schools.

The practice is in the process of recovering from the steep slide into marginality that began in the 1960s. But the climb back up is slow. An English teacher I spoke with told me (not happily) that such close attention to the making of correct sentences is now considered dull and dreary—that it interferes with “the full flow of the students' creativity”: if they have to think about making every little thing correct, how can they express themselves? As I remember it, the last thing you were expected to do at my school in the '50s was express yourself. You were indeed expected to make every little thing correct, and if you inadvertently expressed yourself in the process, well, Sister Bernadette might just grab you by the ear and drag you to the principal's office.

The teachers I've talked to who teach diagramming seem to have found a nice balance: the kids are free to express themselves, but in correct, intelligible English that's a pleasure rather than a chore to read. □

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