

English 265 – Style: SENTENCE AND LOGICAL PATTERNS IN ONE PARAGRAPH OF E.B. WHITE'S "THE RING OF TIME"

Paragraph four, sentence by sentence, comments following each one. I have added the color changes and *italics* for emphasis and to make commentary easier. More about these sentence patterns and logical patterns can be found in Richard R. Guzman's *Writing Well Wherever You Work*. See the Books page on this site.

The ten-minute ride the girl took achieved—as far as I was concerned, *who wasn't* looking for it, and quite unbeknownst to her, *who wasn't* even striving for it—the thing **that is** sought by performers everywhere, on whatever stage, whether struggling in the tidal currents of Shakespeare or bucking the difficult motion **of** a horse.

Comment: A beautiful Pattern 7 sentence. Note the nice *parallelism* of “who wasn't.” The repetition makes the “interruption” a species of Pattern 5, even though it's not a complete sentence. Could the words in blue be eliminated?

I somehow got the idea she was just cadging a ride, improving a shining ten minutes in the diligent way all serious artists seize free moments *to hone the blade of their talent* and keep themselves **in** trim.

Comment: A Pattern 1 sentence, the word “improving” being a present participial. Note the *blade* metaphor, and the way White follows a long sentence not only with another pattern, but one of medium length. Could “in” go?

Her brief tour included only elementary postures and tricks, *perhaps* because they were all she was capable of, *perhaps* because her warmup **at** this hour **was** unscheduled and the ring **was** not rigged **for** a real practice session.

Comment: The repetition of “perhaps” marks this as a Pattern 5 sentence. Blue words?

She swung herself off and on the horse several times, gripping its mane.

Comment: Another Pattern 1 sentence. “Gripping its mane” could have come first, but is it better last? Also, after two medium sentences we have this short one.

She did a few knee-stands—or whatever they are called—dropping to her knees and quickly bouncing **back up on** her feet again.

Comment: A little longer sentence, though in the context of the whole paragraph one of the shorter ones. A combination of Pattern 1 and Pattern 7, “dropping” being another participial. Blue words? Why not just “bouncing back up again”? This is NOT a simple question.

Most of the time she simply rode in a standing position, well aft **on** the beast, her hands *hanging* easily at her side, her head erect, her straw colored ponytail lightly *brushing* her shoulders, the blood of exertion *showing* faintly though the tan **of** her skin.

Comment: A gorgeous Pattern 1 sentence, absolute phrases floating behind the main clause. Create absolute phrases by turning finite verbs into participials, as in phrases 1, 3, and 4. Thus, the potentially complete sentences

“Her hands *hung*...” becomes the phrase “her hands *hanging*...”

“Her...ponytail *brushed*...” becomes the phrase “her...ponytail *brushing*...”

“The blood...*showed*...” becomes the phrase “the blood...*showing*...”

You can also create an absolute phrase by pulling out a “to be” verb, as happens in the second phrase, where the potential complete sentence “Her head *was* erect” becomes the phrase “her head erect.”

Note: This comment begins by featuring an absolute phrase.

Blue words?

Twice she managed a one-foot stance—a sort of ballet pose, **with** arms outstretched.

Comment: Short, rather plain sentence following a great Pattern 1. The dash doesn't really mark it as a Pattern 7. I would seriously consider nixing “with.” I suppose I should—given White's semi-metaphorical nod to ballet—nix the “plain” thing. Note: I could have written the preceding sentence, “I suppose—given White's semi-metaphorical nod to ballet—I should nix the ‘plain’ thing,” but this would have made a lesser Pattern 7. **Why?**

At one point the neck strap of her bathing suit broke and she went twice around the ring in the *classic attitude* of a woman making minor repairs to a garment.

Comment: A medium-length sentence. How does White's allusion to something “classic” create “resonance”? Earlier in the paragraph “Shakespeare” also creates important resonance.

The fact that she was standing on the back of a moving horse while doing this invested the matter with a clownish significance that perfectly fitted the spirit of the circus—*jocund, yet charming*.

Comment: Could the first four words be reduced to two? What logic—leading to one *tension* in the paragraph—do the last three words indicate?

She just rolled the strap into a neat ball and stowed it inside her bodice while the horse rocked and rolled beneath her in dutiful innocence.

Comment: What logical pattern implied here?

The bathing suit proved as self-reliant as its owner and stood up well enough without the benefit of a strap.

Comment: What logical pattern here? As for the sentences themselves, White ends with *four* sentences of roughly the same length and structure, violating our rule of thumb. Does this affect the rhythm negatively? Do the shifting logical forms make up for, or balance, a lack of shifting sentence lengths and structures?

Note: The first sentence of the next paragraph begins, “The richness of the scene was in its plainness...”—an aphoristic idea full of significant tension—and White returns to greater sentence variety.