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English 525—Practical Grammar
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Midterm

Question #9: In a piece of successful writing, identify and analyze the verbs.
(also answers Question #11: Discuss narrative tense in a passage.)
See Appendix.

Dramatic verb structure builds the set design in “Kleenex,” a short essay I published as a medical student in 1988. Three different scenes and a framing scene are sharply marked by verb forms that take the reader to each scene.

Adverbs and pronouns also contribute to the dramatic effect, but these two parts of speech could not light the stage without the verbs that set the scenes.

The first sentence plants the narrative root in the present, with present tense verbs “graduate” and “work,” and looks to a future of ongoing, unchanging process with the phrasal verb “go through” in the present progressive future sense “am going to.” We gradually learn that this narrative root is the day after a hospital encounter, sometime after the first year of medical school and before graduation. The last sentence of the essay returns to this time. The narrative root is not a fully realized scene. It only frames other scenes and times.

The scene that gives rise to the essay occurred “yesterday” “in a large, modern hospital.” The verbs of this scene are past tense, but many are past progressive, until a series of decisive past tense verbs mark the end of the scene.

The hospital scene is divided into three sections, split by the commentary of the other two scenes. In the first paragraph, the location and characters of the scene are introduced. The characters are the first-person narrator, “my team,” and “a patient.” In the first two sections of the scene, the patient is less a character than are her eyes. Not much happens in this first section.

The narrator's verb is past progressive, "was observing," with no direct object to connect the action with a target. A verb like that makes the narrator just a fly on the wall. The patient's verb is also past progressive, "were starting," with an infinitive direct object "to leak."

The most active and vivid verb in the section goes to the team, which "had to deliver," a simple past tense phrasal verb with the direct object "some bad news," and the indirect object "patient" buried in the adverbial prepositional phrase "to a patient."

The patient who gives the medical team a reason to exist is barely present in this section of the scene. She is the presumed owner of the eyes that are starting to leak, and she is the indirect object of the team's action. She is not the subject of any verb. The effect of writing "Her eyes were starting to leak" instead of "She began to cry" is to push the patient into the background of the scene.

The hospital scene is then interrupted by the second scene of the essay, about the general theme of crying patients. This scene begins "in the first year of medical school," at least one year and less than four years ago, since we know the narrator has not yet graduated. It is narrated in past tense from the narrative root, "had" and "was," and past progressive "were teaching." Then an interesting thing happens. Five questions about the best response to a crying patient build on parallel structures. "What do you...? Do you...? Do you...? Do you...? Do you...?" The reader is brought live to the classroom dialogue by the demanding present tense interrogative verbs and the second person pronoun. The narrative root interrupts briefly to identify the answer in past tense, then, back in class, we hear the answer in present tense, "First you give them Kleenex."

The second section of the hospital scene completes the second paragraph. What doesn't happen in this section is more notable than what does. The verbs are weak, linking verbs in past

tense, “got,” “was,” and “did not want” which takes an infinitive direct object “to get.” A gerund prepositional phrase “for being soft” modifies the direct object of that infinitive.

The patient is still not present, just her eyes, and this time the team is only present as the object of a preposition. The narrator considers action—but does not commit—with a past progressive verb, “started looking,” broken by the adverb “furtively.” She justifies her inaction by telling the reader she anticipates conflict with her team if she acts: “I didn’t want to get a reputation for being soft on patients.” This background on the social context of the team works as an adverbial modifying the narrator’s actions in the scene. In dramatic terms, it “raises the stakes” for taking action.

The hospital scene is interrupted for the second time by a scene that repeats the present tense and second person pronoun structure of the classroom scene, but with differences that mark it as a kind of parody of the classroom scene. The many phrasal verbs, including “find out,” “come in,” “come out,” “hang together,” “going on,” mark the tone, and the character voice, as informal. Verbal forms abound, such as gerund prepositional phrases, infinitives, and nominal verb phrases, marking a loosening of categories atypical of medical classrooms. This is a lecture on medical interviewing technique given in the same style as a lecture on raising chickens.

As in the hospital scene, the patient in this scene begins as a theoretical abstraction and becomes a struggling (though not specific) human being. As the patient individuates in this scene, the narrator comes closer to achieving her goal and the verbs become more dramatic and diversify into other tenses. Two sentences in the middle of the scene pile on coordinate threesomes of verbs, “listen,” “watch,” and “play;” and infinitives, “to stop,” “[to] look,” and “[to] offer.” As the narrator strikes diagnostic home, the dramatic immediacy of the moment with the patient is focussed by shoving the work of getting to this point into the conditional past

perfect, “If you have steered;” and by elevating the climax into the conditional future, “will collapse..and tell.”

Releasing the patient’s inhibitions is the climax for the clinician. After the storm, in a compact paragraph, a few short sentences in present progressive tense report what patients face. The present participle “dying” is elided after the first mention as if thinking about dying is so common in this world that we can take it for granted. The narrator sweeps from subjunctive present to past perfect, “It could be and has been...,” to summarize what she has heard from patients to whom she gave Kleenex at just the right time.

The third and last section of the hospital scene gives the strong verbs, most in simple past tense, to the narrator. She “knew,” “reached,” “pulled” and “handed,” packing the last three into one climactic coordinate sentence. As if unmasked by this action, the patient appears for the first time, as “she,” with simple past tense verbs “looked” and “blew.”

The team is only present in this last section as a verbless sentence fragment that completes the narrator’s thought: “...what was bothering this patient. My team.” How different it would be if “My team was bothering this patient.”

In the arc of this scene, built on the verb structures, the team has declined from action to fragment, the narrator has risen from observer to risk-taker, and the change has brought the patient to life.

Question #7: Discuss how adverbs work in an excerpt of effective writing.
(See Appendix)

“Kleenex,” a short essay I published as a medical student in 1988, tells its story using far more adverbs and adverbials than adjectives. The story it tells concerns storytelling, listening and intention, all best colored by adverbs. There are only two, perhaps three, visual images in the entire essay: one patient’s reddening eyes, another’s stiff upper lip, and the paper towel transaction at the end between narrator and patient.

The majority of the adverbs describe time, such as “when,” “yesterday,” “way back,” “first,” “until,” “suddenly,” “finally,” especially early in the essay as it establishes its temporal structure. Later on there are more adverbs of manner, such as “furtively,” “sympathetically,” “discreetly,” and “gratefully,” as characters interact on the temporal scaffolding.

Prepositional phrases are used frequently and usually straightforwardly. Only three are gerund prepositional phrases. One is a wh- nominal clause using “whatever,” and one simile, “as Mr. Sulu does...” is a nominal clause with a substituted verb.

In contrast to the many phrasal verbs that give the narrator an informal, personal style, only two complex adverbs are used, “way back” and “right away;” and only one complex preposition is used, “out of.”

The overall pattern of the prepositional phrases in this essay is that about three-fourths of them are adverbial, and only one-fourth of them are adjectival.

In contrast to the high frequency of prepositional phrases in most of the essay, the absence of prepositional phrases in two sections marks them as a very different, unadorned, kind of discourse. The two sections are the classroom dialogue questions of the second paragraph, and the “Maybe they think they’re dying” sequence of the fourth paragraph.