Painting with Five Basic Brush Strokes

Just as the painter combines a wide repertoire of brush stroke techniques to create an image, the writer chooses from a repertoire of sentence structures. Although professionals use an array of complex structures, students can begin to learn the art of image grammar by employing five basic brush strokes: (1) the participle, (2) the absolute, (3) the appositive, (4) adjectives shifted out of order, and (5) action verbs. To help students paint easily, teachers should simplify definitions, relying on modeling and expanding definitions as students increase their fluency.

Painting with Participles
To simplify the concept of the participle for students, teachers can define it as an *ing* verb tagged on the beginning or end of a sentence. (Variations using *ed* forms can be introduced later.) For example, picture in your mind’s eye, a nest of snakes curling around some prey. One writer/artist might describe this with, “The diamond-scaled snakes attacked their prey.” This image captures a little of what might be happening, but watch the effect when the writer adds a few participles (*ing* verbs) to the beginning of the sentence: “Hissing, slithering, and coiling, the diamond-scaled snakes attacked their prey.”

The participles evoke action. Suddenly, we can see the snakes coiling and slithering. The sound of their hissing makes us feel that we are part of the experience.

Students can also add participial phrases, a participle along with any modifiers that complete the image. Visualize how this works when two participial phrases are added to our original sentence: “Hissing their forked red tongues and coiling their cold bodies, the diamond-scaled snakes
attacked their prey.” Both methods—adding several participles or adding one or two participial phrases—paint more detailed pictures. Using single participles creates rapid movement, while expanded phrases add details at a slower, but equally intense pace.

One of the clearest ways to define brush strokes for students is by showing models and having them imitate. Here are a few examples that helped clarify how professionals use participles and participial phrases.

Ernest Hemingway, for example, uses participial phrases to create tension and action in this excerpt from *Old Man and the Sea*:

> Shifting the weight of the line to his left shoulder and kneeling carefully, he washed his hand in the ocean and held it there, submerged, for more than a minute, watching the blood trail away and the steady movement of the water against his hand as the boat moved. (56-57)

In this passage Hemingway used the *ed* participle *submerged* for similar effect. When first working with brush strokes, students often confuse the *ed* form with the predicate of the sentence. So, it is best to begin with an *ing* definition and introduce the *ed* once students have control of the *ing* brush stroke.

The following student examples were written after several examples were created by the teacher using slide images. Only the minimal definition given above was presented. Notice how the student writers use participles and participial phrases to enhance the action and add visual detail.

> Flying through the air on the wings of a dream, the Olympic long jumper thrust the weight of his whole body forward. (Cathleen Conry)

> Melody froze, dripping with sweat, hoping with all her might that they wouldn’t hear the noise. A beam of light swung out into the darkness, searching. (Becky Swab)

> The clown, appearing bright and cheerful, smiled and did his act with unusual certainty for someone who had just killed a man. (Christi Flick)

> The rhino, caught in the tangled rope, looked for freedom. (Erika Schreckengost) (Note that Erika generated this *ed* form before it was presented in class by imitating *ing* models.)

An equally powerful brush stroke that also adds to the action of an image is the *absolute*. An absolute is a two-word combination—a noun and an *ing* or *ed* verb added onto a sentence. Instead of saying “The cat climbed the tree,” you can add two absolutes to give it detail: “Claws digging, feet kick-
ing, the cat climbed the tree.” Either way the cat gets up the tree, but in the second instance, he climbs with flair, and the dog chasing him is amazed.

**Painting with Absolutes**

To help students understand absolutes, try this approach. Have them close their eyes and picture a mountain climber moving along a steep cliff. Pause for a moment and ask students to visualize this one sentence description: “The mountain climber edged along the cliff.”

Next, explain that you are going to add a brush stroke, defined simply as a noun combined with an *ing* participle. (Again, *ed* participles can come later.) Then, with their eyes still closed, tell them to watch what happens as you add two absolutes. Read the sentence: “The mountain climber edged along the cliff, hands shaking, feet trembling.” Or in the reverse order: “Hands shaking, feet trembling, the mountain climber edged along the cliff.” Although adding three absolutes overloads the picture and diminishes the effect, one or two creates a far more dynamic image than the original.

As with participles, explain to students that absolute phrases are also effective. For example, with the previous example, the climber might have been described with an absolute phrase, such as “Feet trembling on the snow-covered rocks, the mountain climber edged along the cliff.”

Gary Hoffman in *Writeful* suggests another way of teaching absolutes—by asking students to imagine that the comma controls a telescopic lens that zooms in on images. Using the basic sentence “The rhapis palm sat in a large, white container” he demonstrates the zoom technique:

The writer can zoom up on any part of the picture that is already framed by the original sentence. In this example, that means zooming up on either the container or the palm.

For instance, assume the branches of the palm are the detail of interest. Without any word of transition, only a twist of a zoom lens represented by a comma, the sentence can now read: “The rhapis palm sat in a large, white container, the branches stretching into the air...” The writer can place a comma after “air” and zoom up something framed in this part of the sentence. This time the zoom can only be on the branches or air because the “camera” has focused on them, cutting the general description of the palm and container out of the picture.

Suppose there is nothing of interest about the air, but the branches have interesting joints or nodes. Zooming in on those, the sentence would now read: “The rhapis palm sat in a large, white container, the branches stretching into the air, fibrous joints knuckling the otherwise smooth surface.” (20)
The zoom analogy works nicely for teaching students not only to use absolutes, but also participles, appositives, adjectives out of order, and a variety of other grammatical brush strokes. The zoom also helps to convey the proper use of commas to connect phrases to a simple sentence. Below are some sample absolute images created by professional and student writers. Using commas to zoom in on details, these writers telescoped images both at the beginning and end of their primary sentences. Showing examples such as these to students before they write can help them learn absolutes by imitating.

Notice how Anne Rice in this passage from *The Mummy* uses absolutes to zoom in for a close-up photo, capturing the specific images of the mummy’s arm:

The mummy was moving. The mummy’s right arm was outstretched, the torn wrappings hanging from it, as the being stepped out of its gilded box! The scream froze in her throat. The thing was coming towards her—towards Henry, who stood with his back to it—moving with a weak, shuffling gait, that arm outstretched before it, the dust rising from the rotting linen that covered it, a great smell of dust and decay filling the room. (72)

In the following one-sentence examples, students painted with absolutes and absolute phrases as they observed slides:

Mind racing, anxiety overtaking, the diver peered once more at the specimen. (Erin Stralka)

I glanced at my clock, digits glowing florescent blue in the inky darkness of my room. (Jenn Coppolo)

Jaws cracking, tongue curling, the kitten yawned tiredly, awakening from her nap. (Tara Tesmer)

One of the most common brush strokes in the action sequences of fiction, the absolute infuses action into a word painting. Just as the artist requires a variety of painting techniques to vary effect, the writer too needs a repertoire of devices to shape impressions. A third technique, the appositive, provides another option, often used to amplify still images.

**Painting with Appositives**
For student word painters, teachers can define an appositive as a noun that adds a second image to a preceding noun. Like the absolute, the appositive expands details in the reader’s imagination. For example, by adding a second image to the noun *raccoon* in the sentence “The raccoon enjoys eating
turtle eggs,” the writer/artist can enhance the first image with a new perspective. For example, the writer might paint the sentence “The raccoon, a scavenger, enjoys eating turtle eggs.”

Scavenger follows raccoon in the sentence; it’s set off with commas and enriches the image of the painting. To add more vivid details, writers frequently expand the appositive to an appositive phrase with added details such as “The raccoon, a midnight scavenger who roams lake shorelines in search of food, enjoys eating turtle eggs.”

Observe how Cornelius Ryan uses appositives in June 6, 1944: The Longest Day. He could have written: “A phalanx of ships and planes bore down on Hitler’s Europe,” but instead, Ryan expanded the image with appositives and then extended the picture with further specific examples:

Plowing through the choppy gray waters, a phalanx of ships bore down on Hitler’s Europe: fast new attack transports, slow rust-scarred freighters, small ocean liners, channel steamers, hospital ships, weather-beaten tankers, and swarms of fussing tugs. Barrage balloons flew above the ships. Squadrons of fighter planes weaved below the clouds. And surrounding this cavalcade of ships packed with men, guns, tanks, and motor vehicles, and supplies came a formidable array of 702 warships. (243)

With the same intent as Cornelius Ryan, eighth-grade students used appositives and appositive phrases to add a second noun image in each of the following sketches from photographs:

The volcano, a ravenous God of fire, spewed forth lava and ash across the mountain. (Ben Quagliata)

The old Navajo woman, a weak and withered lady, stared blankly. (Jon Vadnal)

The waterfall, a tilted pitcher, poured the fresh, pure spray into the creek. The essence of natural beauty, tranquil and majestic, it seemed to enchant the forest with a mystical rush that echoed throughout the untouched virgin paradise. (Allie Archer)

The fish, a slimy mass of flesh, felt the alligator’s giant teeth sink into his scales as he struggled to get away. (Lindsey Kannen)

Working with fiction in the examples above, student-artists used appositives to expand the sensory details. In nonfiction authors more often use an appositive image to add clarity in phrases such as “Michael Jordan, the famous basketball player.” All brush strokes work equally well for fiction, nonfiction, or poetry, but each genre creates a different emphasis.
Painting with Adjectives Shifted Out of Order
Adjectives out of order, used more often by authors of fiction, amplify the
details of an image. We have all seen students overload their descriptions
with too many adjectives in sentences like “The large, red-eyed, angry bull
moose charged the intruder.” Professional authors rarely commit this error.
When they want to stack an image with three adjectives, they avoid a
three-in-a-row string by using a technique called adjectives out of order.
Leaving one adjective in its original place, the authors shift two others after
the noun. With the sentence about the angry moose, a professional might
transform it into “The large bull moose, red-eyed and angry, charged the
intruder.” The effect creates a spotlight and intensifies the image, giving it
a profound rhythm instead of the elementary cadence of the original.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in The Hound of the Baskervilles uses this tech-
nique to shift three adjectives to the end of a sentence to describe a mysteri-
ous sound: “And then, suddenly, in the very dead of the night, there came
a sound to my ears, clear, resonant, and unmistakable” (72). Had he placed
the adjectives in their normal position, the description would have seemed
childish. Listen to the loss of power when the sentence is written as “And
then, suddenly, in the very dead of the night, there came a clear, resonant,
unmistakable sound to my ears.”

Similarly, in The Alienist, Caleb Carr describes arriving at the Insane
Pavilion at Bellevue in New York City: “The Pavilion was a simple city,
long and rectangular” (27). Again, shifting the adjectives out of their nor-
mal order creates a focus. Robert Newton Peck uses the same technique in
this sentence from A Day No Pigs Would Die: “I could smell Mama, crisp
and starched, plumping my pillow, and the cool muslin pillowcase touched
both my ears as the back of my head sank into all those feathers” (12).

Students can learn to use this technique effectively as the following
examples illustrate:

The woman, old and wrinkled, smiled upon her newborn great-
grandson with pride. (Stephanie Schwallie)
The boxer, twisted and tormented, felt no compassion for his con-
tender. (Chris Hloros)
The cheetah, tired and hungry, stared at the gazelle, which would soon
become his dinner. (Zach Vesoulis)

Painting with Action Verbs
Painting with action verbs gives writers another effective image tool. By
eliminating passive voice and reducing being verbs, writers can energize
action images. Verbs of passive voice communicate no action. The image is like a still photograph with the subject of the action frozen with the prepositions by or with. Typically, passive voice verbs require the help of a being verb. For example, these sentences are passive:

The runaway horse was ridden into town by an old, white-whiskered rancher.

The grocery store was robbed by two armed men.

Notice how the word by signals the noun performing the action. Passive voice can weaken images by freezing the action often inherent in a sentence. Compare the following revisions of the previous passive sentences and notice how active voice energizes the images:

The old, white-whiskered rancher rode the runaway horse into town.

Two armed men robbed the grocery store.

Even when not used as part of a passive voice, being verbs slow the action and tend to link complements that tell. Students can improve the power of their sentences by replacing as many being verbs as possible, often by creating an appositive. For example, examine these two sentences: “The Nerk Knocker is a strange mechanical contraption. It brews coffee while beating a drum solo.” Both could be combined into a single, more powerful statement such as, “The Nerk Knocker, a strange mechanical contraption, brews coffee while beating a drum solo.”

Action verbs replace still photos with motion pictures. With a little imagination, a writer can even bring an inanimate object to life by adding an action verb:

Being Verb: The gravel road was on the left side of the barn.

Action Verb: The gravel road curled around the left side of the barn.