

Wrapped in Simplicity

In his essay “Dehumanized,” Mark Slouka plays the risky role as a supporter of the humanities in a world increasingly ruled by STEM fields—but this position comes at a price. From his description of math and science as one entity (Slouka coins the creative term “mathandscience” (38) to describe this phenomenon) to the economics being a greedy monopoly to the humanities’ own degeneration, the argument against the well-established STEM fields is inevitably provocative and complex—perhaps excessively so. To the average, non-scholarly reader, such a claim would be too monotonous and tedious to read, if not for Slouka’s artful use of sentence variety that clarifies and switches up the tone amidst his reasoning. Slouka successfully claims that math and the sciences dominate schools and argues the importance of the humanities by employing short, declarative sentences in order to introduce and summarize key points of his argument, as well as to clarify embedded nuances for increased understanding.

Short sentences are the key to clearly separate main ideas. They act as signposts in their ability to indicate movement in the piece, but without the explicitness. When he exclaims, “Look at us!” (40), for example, the focus of the article clearly changes from a discussion of math and science to an illustration of the current state of the humanities. While it is part of a slow transition into the counterclaim—that the humanities are not only being pushed out by the non-humanities but are also falling apart by themselves—this sentence switches the reader’s mind to his point. *Look at you!* It’s the spoken disapproval of a mother berating her child for playing in the mud. *Look at us!* yells Slouka, and the reader looks expectantly; and then he describes the weaknesses of his own side, and the reader vividly sees the dilapidated field of the humanities cowering in the corner of the room.

Sometimes the short sentences are used to indicate a change not of idea, but tone. When Slouka diverges from his main argument to describe the idealism of perfect teaching, the subsequent paragraph begins with: “I’m joking, of course” (34). Joking? This transforms the tone of innocent ignorance about teaching to one of the pitiful reality that he wants to introduce. This sentence nullifies the previous one—which exists simply for rhetorical effect as the unrealistic counterpart to juxtapose against—and resumes the initial doomsday tone. This more complex chain of reasoning forces the reader to understand the meaning behind Slouka’s “joking” words and realize that he is simply describing what teaching is *not* before he illustrates what teaching *is*. This thus provides the reader with both an unideal realism and the unreal idealism that explains the inevitability of sub-ideal education, which supports his main argument that education is unfairly biased towards “mathandscience.” This understanding is facilitated solely by this short signpost, the clear indicator that Slouka deliberately distinguishes falsity from fact.

But Slouka's use of short sentences as introductory phrases are overshadowed by the ones used for summary—those which enforce every idea in his complex argument. He places these liberally to expand upon the claim with a touch of his voice to conversationally synthesize previously-presented data or a claim. Slouka introduces the claim that “[the humanities] are being forced to account for ourselves in [math and science’s] idiom” (33), but this statement can have multiple implications. Does this force the two sides to work together? How does this interaction affect the relationship between STEM fields and the humanities, and how does it affect the reader? Slouka clarifies: “It’s not working” (33)—the readers’ questions are not left to chance, and the implied negativity is brought out explicitly with layman’s terms. The previous sentence describes the issue; this sentence describes the effect.

Slouka uses a multitude of these summarical sentences for a similar emphasis on explicit implicitness. When he states, “It’s a neat trick” (33) when referring to the market’s hold on education for profit, the reader notices the duplicity of the industry from the word “trick.” Or when he answers his own rhetorical question about the call for business’ accountability, he appends, “And that’s it, more or less” (36), declaring that there is no better alternative. Or when he clarifies the effect of the humanities on a dictatorship, he follows up with the aphorism-like statement: “Dogma adores a vacuum” (38), reinforcing the direct relation between despotism (“dogma”) and the lack of the humanities (“vacuum”).

Visually as well as logically do these briefer sentences appeal to a broader audience. Long sentences bore, drone, and drag, while shorter sentences offer a convenient “go-to” for information and a visible contrast from long statistics and logic. This is most common with Slouka’s use of hypophora—in other words, directly answering a question that already implies an answer. The bane of concision, yet the epitome of Slouka’s rhetoric. “No doubt” (38), Slouka says to his own question, affirming that he feels unjustly oppressed by the profit-begetting monopoly of education by business. But is this not Slouka’s claim for the entire article? It seems a bit redundant, doesn’t it?

But also when there are very long sentences, no matter how enticing their rationale, there arises the need for attracting attention back to the article through the use of redundancy with short sentences. Slouka argues in one sentence that:

“One might assume that in an aspiring democracy like ours the answers would be equally straightforward: We teach whatever contributes to the development of autonomous human beings; we teach, that is, in order to expand the census of knowledgeable, reasoning, independent-minded individuals both sufficiently familiar with the world outside themselves to lend their judgements compassion and breadth (and therefore contribute to the political life of the nation), and sufficiently skilled to find productive employment” (34).

—a goliath of a sentence, encompassing twelve lines of the article, and easily losing the attention of the reader. The following sentence is simply: “In that order” (34). Seventy-four words, and then three. The latter simply reinforces a claim of the former, that an ideal education would place democratic value over economic profit; this statement is not necessary from a logical point of view, but very favorable if Slouka hopes to project the complex views of the former without boring the audience. This redundancy is also supportive when it comes to hypophora, forcibly emphasizing Slouka’s claim.

While the content of “Dehumanized” holds the majority of the argument, language itself—with Slouka’s use of sentence variety artfully acting solely as a method of rhetoric and persuasion—demonstrates the claim to the necessity of the humanities. The great contrast between adjacent sentences shows the effect of literature. He is promoting the art of persuasion, of rhetoric and of the humanities, through his own persuasion, rhetoric, and knowledge of the humanities. The employment of short, directed sentences scattered throughout Slouka’s essay are details comprising the “play” (32) of the collapse of humanities that Slouka considers himself a part of; he is an actor of the losing side, desperately redeeming his art through the use of radical but artful sentence variety.

A champion of the humanities in both knowledge and skill, Mark Slouka’s rhetorical skill with short sentences in “Dehumanized” provides the reader both a thorough understanding of the debate over the teaching of the humanities and STEM in school as well as a working example in support of the humanities. By themselves, these brief sentences have the ability to introduce, describe, and conclude; together with more complex sentences and ideas, they emphasize, clarify, and stimulate. Slouka argues against the incumbent ruler of the school—“mathandscience”—with a claim that is unpreventably long-winded, but to the reader these core ideas are wrapped in the comfortable simplicity of emotionally-charged, horizontally-challenged, period-separated phrases.

They’re everywhere in Slouka’s piece. They’re assertive. They’re simple.

And they work.

Works Cited

Slouka, Mark. “Dehumanized.” *Harper’s Magazine*. Sept. 2009: 32-40. Print.