

The Grammar of Conflagration: Deconstructing Joan Didion's Santa Anas

Materials Needed

- A copy of Joan Didion's essay "Los Angeles Notebook" from her book *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (specifically the section on the Santa Ana winds).
- A notebook or word processor for writing and analysis.
- A whiteboard, large sheet of paper, or a digital equivalent (like a Jamboard or Miro board).
- Markers in at least four different colors.
- Access to an online etymology resource, such as [etymonline.com](https://www.etymonline.com).

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, the student will be able to:

- **Analyze** how Joan Didion uses syntax (sentence structure) and diction (word choice) to create a specific mood and argument.
- **Apply** the Michael Clay Thompson (MCT) four-level sentence analysis to deconstruct a complex sentence and explain its stylistic effect.
- **Investigate** the morphology and etymology of a key word from the text using the principles of Structured Word Inquiry (SWI).
- **Create** a short piece of descriptive writing that emulates Didion's style, applying the grammatical and lexical techniques studied in the lesson.

Lesson Plan & Activities

I. The Hook: Feeling the Weather (10 minutes)

Begin with a conversation to connect the literary topic to personal experience.

1. **Opening Question:** "Have you ever felt like the weather was changing your mood, or the mood of everyone around you? Not just in a simple way, like a sunny day making you happy, but in a deeper, more unsettling way?"
2. **Discussion:** Talk about how a looming thunderstorm, oppressive humidity, or an eerie fog can create a feeling of tension, anxiety, or even paranoia. The goal is to establish the idea that weather can have a powerful psychological effect.
3. **Transition:** "Joan Didion is a master at capturing this feeling. She wrote about the Santa Ana winds in Los Angeles, which are hot, dry winds that locals believe make people irritable and strange. She argues that the wind itself is a character that sets the stage for chaos. Let's see how she does it."

II. Close Reading: Hearing Didion's Wind (15 minutes)

In this section, the focus is on Didion's masterful use of language to create atmosphere.

1. **Shared Reading:** Read aloud the first three paragraphs of the Santa Ana section from "Los Angeles Notebook." As you read, pay attention to the rhythm and flow of the sentences.
2. **Initial Impressions:** Ask the student for their gut reactions. "What feeling does this passage give you? What words or phrases jump out? How does she make the wind feel sinister or 'malevolent'?"

3. **Highlighting Key Diction:** Identify and discuss specific word choices like "*malevolent*," "*uneasy*," "*surreal*," "*incendiary*," "*fret*." Ask why she chose these precise words over simpler synonyms.

III. Grammatical Autopsy: The Four-Level Sentence Analysis (25 minutes)

This is where we dissect Didion's craft to understand how she builds her effects at the grammatical level. We will analyze a single, powerful sentence on the whiteboard.

Sentence for Analysis:

"I have neither heard nor read that a Santa Ana is due, but I know it, and almost everyone I have seen today knows it too: I know it because the air carries the static portent of thunderstorms and I know it because the snake skins rustle in the new grass and the mountain lion screams in the dark."

1. **Level 1 (Parts of Speech):** Using a specific color, identify the basic building blocks: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions.
2. **Level 2 (Parts of the Sentence):** With a second color, identify the core components of the clauses: subjects and predicates (verbs).
3. **Level 3 (Phrases):** With a third color, bracket and label the phrases, especially the prepositional phrases (e.g., "*of thunderstorms*," "*in the new grass*," "*in the dark*").
4. **Level 4 (Clauses):** Using a fourth color, underline and identify each clause as either independent (can stand alone as a sentence) or dependent (cannot). This is the most crucial level for understanding the sentence's architecture.
 - Notice the chain of independent clauses linked by conjunctions ("but," "and") and the colon.
 - Notice how the dependent "because" clauses pile up evidence, creating a feeling of mounting certainty and dread.
5. **Analytical Discussion:** Ask probing questions. "Why did Didion build the sentence this way? What is the effect of the repetition of 'I know it'? How does this long, almost breathless sentence mirror the unsettling, inescapable feeling of the wind she is describing?"
(Guide the student to see that the structure isn't accidental; it's a tool to make the reader feel the paranoia and accumulating tension.)

IV. Word Investigation: Structured Word Inquiry (SWI) (15 minutes)

Now, we'll magnify our focus from the sentence to a single, powerful word Didion uses: **flagrant**. While not in the sentence we analyzed, the *idea* is central to the essay's mood.

1. **Hypothesize:** The word "flagrant" usually means "shockingly or obviously offensive." Let's investigate its history to see if there's a deeper meaning at play.
2. **Find Evidence (Etymology):** Look up "flagrant" on etymonline.com. Discover its root: Latin *flagrare*, meaning "to burn, blaze, glow."
3. **Analyze the Structure (Morphology):**
 - Create a word sum: **flagr + ant → flagrant**
 - Identify the morphemes:
 - **<flagr>** is the base, meaning "to burn."
 - **<-ant>** is a suffix that can form an adjective.
4. **Build a Word Matrix:** Explore other words that share this base on the whiteboard.
 - **Base:** <flagr>
 - **Prefix:** <con-> ("with/thoroughly")
 - **Suffixes:** <-ant>, <-ate>, <-ation>, <-ancy>
 - **Words to build:** *flagrant*, *flagrancy*, *conflagration* (*con* + *flagr* + *ate* + *ion*).
5. **Synthesize and Discuss:** "How does knowing that 'flagrant' is related to 'burning' and 'conflagration' add a layer of meaning to Didion's essay about fire season? She describes the

Santa Anas as creating a 'flash point,' a place where violence can erupt. How is the atmosphere she describes 'flagrant' in both senses of the word—obviously tense and ready to burn?"

V. Creative Application: Writing into the Storm (25 minutes)

This is the culminating activity where the student moves from analysis to creation, putting the discovered techniques into practice.

1. **The Prompt:** "Choose a weather phenomenon you know well—a thick fog, a blizzard, an oppressive heat wave, a thunderstorm. Your task is to write one or two paragraphs describing the *psychological effect* of that weather, in the style of Joan Didion. Don't just describe what you see; describe what it feels like in your mind and what it seems to do to the people around you."
2. **The Creative Constraints (The 'Game'):**
 - You must include at least **one long, complex sentence** that uses multiple clauses to build momentum or a specific feeling, just like the one we analyzed.
 - You must purposefully use a word from the **<flagr>** matrix (e.g., *flagrant*, *conflagration*) in a meaningful way.
 - Focus on creating a distinct **mood of unease, tension, or surreality**.
3. **Writing Time:** Allow ample, quiet time for writing.

VI. Conclusion and Reflection (5 minutes)

Conclude by sharing the creative piece and reflecting on the lesson's core concepts.

1. **Share and Appreciate:** Have the student read their creative piece aloud. Offer positive feedback on their use of Didion's techniques.
2. **Final Discussion:**
 - "How did consciously trying to build a complex sentence affect your writing process?"
 - "What did you learn today about the relationship between grammar and style?"
 - "In what ways can understanding a word's deep history (its etymology) make you a more powerful reader and writer?"