

Lesson Plan: The Grammar of Unease - Analyzing Joan Didion's "Fire Season"

Materials Needed

- A copy of Joan Didion's essay "Los Angeles Notebook," specifically the section on the Santa Ana winds.
- Notebook or paper for writing.
- Pens or pencils in multiple colors (at least four are recommended for sentence analysis).
- A whiteboard or large sheet of paper for the sentence diagramming and word matrix.
- Access to an online etymology dictionary (like etymonline.com).
- Your copy of MCT's *Grammar of Literature* for reference.

Learning Objectives

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

1. Analyze how Joan Didion uses specific grammatical structures (syntax) and word choice (diction) to create a mood of tension and unease.
2. Apply the Michael Clay Thompson (MCT) four-level sentence analysis to deconstruct a sentence from Didion's essay.
3. Use Structured Word Inquiry (SWI) to investigate the morphology and etymology of a key vocabulary word from the text.
4. Create a short piece of original descriptive writing that mimics Didion's atmospheric style, applying the grammatical and lexical techniques studied.

Lesson Activities

Part 1: The Sensory Warm-Up - Feeling the Wind (10 minutes)

The goal here is to connect with the feeling Didion describes before we analyze her words.

1. Close your eyes for a moment. Imagine a day that is unnaturally hot, dry, and windy. The air feels charged with electricity. Think about all your senses:
 - **What do you hear?** (A whistle, a rustle, an unnerving silence?)
 - **What do you feel on your skin?** (Prickly heat, grit, static?)
 - **What do you see?** (Hazy sky, blowing debris, shimmering heat?)
 - **What is your emotional state?** (Irritable, anxious, on edge?)
2. Take 5 minutes to free-write about this feeling. Don't worry about grammar or structure. Just capture the sensory details and the mood.
3. Briefly share what you wrote. What feelings came up most strongly?

Part 2: Guided Reading & Discussion - Entering Didion's World (15 minutes)

Now, let's see how a master writer captures that exact feeling.

1. Read the first five paragraphs of Didion's "Los Angeles Notebook" aloud. As you read, pay attention to the rhythm and flow of the sentences.
2. **Discussion Questions:**

- Didion writes, "The baby frets. The maid sulks." Why are these short, simple sentences so effective? How do they contribute to the mood?
- She also uses long, complex sentences full of clauses, like "The Pacific is glossy...the birds hang motionless in the air." What is the effect of placing these long sentences next to the short ones?
- Notice her word choices: *malevolent*, *uneasy*, *unseasonable*, *surreal*. What do these words have in common? How do they "color" the entire piece?

Part 3: Grammatical Deep Dive - MCT Four-Level Sentence Analysis (20 minutes)

Let's take one of Didion's seemingly simple but powerful sentences and see how its structure creates its meaning. We will analyze: **"The baby frets; the maid sulks."**

On your whiteboard or large paper, let's build the analysis layer by layer using different colored pens for each level.

- **Level 1: Parts of Speech**
 - The (article), baby (noun), frets (verb); the (article), maid (noun), sulks (verb).
 - *Note how simple the words are. They are basic, almost primal actions and nouns.*
- **Level 2: Parts of the Sentence**
 - The baby (subject), frets (verb); the maid (subject), sulks (verb).
 - *We have two perfectly balanced subject-verb pairs. This creates a rhythmic, almost hypnotic effect of one bad thing happening, then another.*
- **Level 3: Phrases**
 - There are no phrases in this sentence! Its power comes from its stark lack of descriptive prepositional phrases or appositives. It's all action and actor.
- **Level 4: Clauses**
 - [The baby frets] (independent clause); [the maid sulks] (independent clause).
 - This is a compound sentence. The two independent clauses are joined by a semicolon. Why a semicolon and not a period? The semicolon tells us these two distinct actions are closely related—they are happening in the same charged atmosphere, one caused by the other. It connects the unease.

Conclusion: Through this analysis, we see that Didion's genius isn't just in what she says, but in the *structure* of how she says it. The perfect parallel structure and the semicolon choice create a feeling of inescapable, connected irritability.

Part 4: Word Inquiry - The Roots of Evil Wind (15 minutes)

Didion uses the word **malevolent** to describe the wind. Let's investigate this word using Structured Word Inquiry to understand its meaning more deeply.

1. **What does malevolent mean?** (Wishing evil or harm to others).
2. **Let's propose a word sum hypothesis.** Based on its meaning, we can guess it's built from parts meaning "bad" and "to wish."
 - Hypothesis: male + vol + ent → malevolent

3. **Investigate the base elements using an etymology dictionary.**

- <male>: A Latin-derived element meaning "badly, ill."
- <vol>: A Latin-derived element meaning "to wish, to will."
- <ent>: A suffix used to form adjectives.

Our hypothesis holds true! The word's structure proves its meaning: "inclined to wish bad things."

4. **Build a Word Matrix:** Brainstorm other words that share these bases. This reveals a family of related words and deepens our understanding.

Example starters for your matrix:

- **From <male>:** malice, malign, malnutrition, malediction
- **From <vol>:** benevolent, volunteer, volition

Part 5: Creative Application - Writing with the Wind (25 minutes)

Now it's your turn to be the writer. Your task is to write a single paragraph (5-7 sentences) describing a tense or uneasy scene. It does not have to be about weather. It could be a quiet classroom during a test, a tense family dinner, or waiting for important news.

Your goal is to imitate Joan Didion's style by using the techniques we just analyzed:

1. **Vary your sentence length.** Use at least one very short, punchy sentence (like "The baby frets.>").
2. **Use a semicolon** to connect two closely related independent clauses.
3. **Choose your words carefully.** Select at least one powerful adjective or verb (like *malevolent*) that sets the mood for the entire paragraph.
4. **Focus on atmosphere over action.** Describe the feeling of the scene more than what is happening.

Part 6: Wrap-up and Reflection (5 minutes)

Read your creative piece aloud. Then, let's reflect:

- Which technique (short sentence, semicolon, or word choice) was most effective in creating the mood you wanted?
- How does understanding grammar and word structure help you become a more powerful writer and a more insightful reader?

Extension & Homework (Optional)

- Find another sentence from the Didion essay that you find powerful. Complete a full four-level MCT analysis on it.
- Expand your creative paragraph into a full one-page descriptive scene.
- Create a full, detailed word matrix for the base <vol> and write a sentence for five of the words you find.