Decoding Didion: Grammar, Wind, and Fire

Materials Needed:

- A copy of Joan Didion's essay "Los Angeles Notebook" (specifically the section on the Santa Ana winds). A digital version is acceptable.
- Notebook or word processor for writing and analysis.
- Pen or pencil in at least two different colors.
- Access to an online etymology dictionary, such as [Etymonline](#).
- Blank paper or a small whiteboard for word matrices and sentence analysis.
- (Optional) Michael Clay Thompson's *Grammar of Literature* textbook for reference.

Lesson Plan: A Journey into Style

Part 1: The Spark - Feeling the Wind (15 minutes)

The goal here is to connect with the mood of the piece before we break it down. Mood isn't magic; it's a deliberate construction of language.

1. **Read Aloud:** Read the first two paragraphs of Didion's section on the Santa Anas. Read it slowly, paying attention to the rhythm and feeling of the words.
2. **Initial Thoughts:** After reading, take two minutes to jot down words that describe the mood or feeling Didion creates. Is it tense? Unsettling? Ominous? Strange? Why?
3. **Word Investigation (Structured Word Inquiry):**

   Didion uses the word **"malevolent"** to describe the wind. Let's explore this powerful word.

   - **Hypothesize:** What do you think this word means? What smaller word parts do you see or hear in it? (You might notice "mal" or "volent").
   - **Investigate:** Go to Etymonline.com and look up "malevolent". Discover its roots:
     - *mal-*: "badly, ill"
     - *velle*: "to wish"
     - *-ent*: an adjective-forming suffix
   - **Synthesize (Word Matrix):** On your paper, build a word sum and a simple matrix.

     Word Sum: mal + vol + ent → malevolent

     Now, can you think of other words that share these roots? (e.g., *malice, malfunction; volunteer, benevolent*). This shows how Didion chose a word with a precise, almost sinister meaning: a wind that "wishes ill" upon the city.

Part 2: The Blueprint - Four-Level Sentence Analysis (25 minutes)

Now, let's become architects and see how Didion builds a sentence to create that "malevolent" feeling. We'll analyze one of her classic, complex sentences using the MCT four-level analysis method.

The Sentence: "The baby frets. The maid sulks. I snap at my husband and he snaps back. I recall being told that on nights like this everyone is in fact sleeping less, the air is tanked with ions."

1. **Level 1: Parts of Speech:** Go through the sentence word by word and label the part of speech for each one. Use one color for this. (e.g., *The* - article, *baby* - noun, *frets* - verb...). Notice the repetition of simple nouns and verbs at the start.

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2. **Level 2: Parts of the Sentence:** Identify the subjects, verbs (transitive/intransitive), and direct objects. (e.g., [S: baby] [V: frets]. [S: maid] [V: sulks].) What do you notice about the structure of the first three sentences? They are identical: Subject-Verb.
3. **Level 3: Phrases:** Identify any phrases (prepositional, gerund, participial, infinitive, appositive). In this sentence, look for prepositional phrases like "on nights like this" and "with ions." How do these phrases add detail and context?
4. **Level 4: Clauses:** Using a different color, bracket and label all the clauses (independent and dependent).
   - [The baby frets.] - IND
   - [The maid sulks.] - IND
   - [I snap at my husband] - IND
   - [and he snaps back.] - IND
   - [I recall being told] - IND
   - [that on nights like this everyone is in fact sleeping less,] - DEP (Noun Clause)
   - [the air is tanked with ions.] - IND (This is tricky! It's an independent clause that functions almost like an explanation tacked on, a very Didion-esque move called a "paratactic" construction).

Part 3: The Artistry - Grammar as Literature (15 minutes)

This is where we connect the blueprint (grammar) to the final building (the literary effect). Look at your four-level analysis and let's discuss what it reveals about Didion's style.

- **The Short, Punchy Start:** Why do you think she begins with a series of short, simple, Subject-Verb sentences? ("The baby frets. The maid sulks.") How does that rhythm make you feel? (It creates a feeling of tension, irritation, and things breaking down into their simplest, ugliest parts).
- **The Shift:** Notice how the sentence structure dramatically shifts from those short, staccato sentences to the long, flowing final sentence. What does this transition feel like? (It's like moving from a series of sharp observations to a deeper, more reflective, and perhaps pseudoscientific explanation for the unease).
- **The Final Clause:** That last part, "the air is tanked with ions," is stated as a fact. By placing it at the very end, what authority or finality does it give to the sentence? It acts as the final, unarguable reason for everyone's bad mood.

Your takeaway: Didion's genius isn't just *what* she says, but *how* she structures her sentences to manipulate rhythm and focus, thereby creating the precise mood she wants you to feel. That is the "Grammar of Literature."

Part 4: The Inferno - Writing with the Wind (30 minutes)

Now it's your turn to be the architect. Your goal is to apply what you've learned by mimicking Didion's style.

Your Creative Prompt:

Choose a weather phenomenon you know well (a humid summer day, a looming thunderstorm, the first freezing cold of winter, a thick fog). Write a single, long paragraph (5-7 sentences) describing its subtle effect on people's moods and behaviors.

Your Stylistic Mission (Your Rubric):

- ☑ **Use a Series of Short Sentences:** Begin with at least two short, simple Subject-Verb sentences to set a tense or stark mood.
- ☑ **Vary Sentence Structure:** Follow the short sentences with a longer, more complex sentence that contains at least one dependent clause.

- ☑ **Precise Vocabulary:** Use at least one powerful, well-chosen word that you could analyze with Structured Word Inquiry (like Didion's "malevolent").
- ☑ **Create a Mood:** The final paragraph should successfully create a distinct feeling (oppressive, tense, sleepy, etc.) through its grammatical structure, not just its word choice.

Part 5: The Embers - Reflection (5 minutes)

Read your paragraph aloud. Does it capture the feeling you were aiming for? Which part of Didion's style was the most challenging or fun to imitate? Briefly explain how you used sentence structure to create the mood, just as we did in Part 3.