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Distanced Relative Clauses in Academic Prose

Our study explored the question of whether relative clauses appear directly after the head nouns they modify—as college composition handbooks prescribe. If they appeared at a distance from their head nouns, we wanted to discover reasons for their alternative placement. The study used Word Smith concordancing software to identify all the *that* relative clauses in a one-million-word corpus derived from three college-level textbooks (history, psychology, and sociology). The data were analyzed manually to find sentences in which a relative clause was distanced from its head noun, to identify the structures that intervened between the relative clause and the head noun, and to determine how new and old information was expressed through these structures.

Contrary to the handbook prescription, our findings indicate that textbook writers and editors frequently do place other grammatical structures between relative clauses and their head nouns. The distanced relative clauses usually appeared in the predicate. Prepositional phrases, particularly those beginning with *of*, were the most common structure intervening between relative clauses and head nouns. The study also revealed noteworthy patterns in the length of intervening structures and in the information management function of both intervening structures and distanced relative clauses. Our findings should help writers of college composition handbooks to portray more accurately the placement of relative clauses.

Our session will include both a complete description of the methodology used in the study and a detailed report of the types and frequencies of structures found between relative clauses and their head nouns as well as the information-management function of distanced relative clauses and intervening structures.