

## Thoughts on propositions (a handout, of sorts!)

What is a proposition?

**A proposition is a statement about reality that can be accepted or rejected.**

It's a claim about how the world is, was, or could be. Propositions are the building blocks beneath your sentences, paragraphs, and essays—often invisible, but always at work.

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Brooks Landon writes: "The style of our sentences is determined by the ways in which we combine not words, but the propositions those words stand for."

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Landon talks about propositions w/r/t sentences. But I think your style as an essayist, too, is largely determined by the way you combine propositions.

## Example

**Sentence** (from EC's own Eliza Loizis):

**"I turn away from the bird and walk the last couple of meters to the sterile white office where joy goes to die – it's inevitable."**

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## STATED PROPOSITIONS (a very incomplete list)

1. The narrator exists ("I")
  2. A bird exists
  3. The narrator turns away from the bird
  4. The narrator walks
  5. The distance is a couple of meters
  6. This is the last couple of meters
  7. An office exists
  8. The office is sterile
  9. The office is white
  10. Joy goes to die in this office
  11. It (the death of joy) is inevitable
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## UNSTATED PROPOSITIONS

12. **The narrator was looking at/attending to the bird**
13. **The bird represents something—freedom, life, nature, vitality**
14. **Turning away is reluctant or significant**
15. **There was a journey leading to this moment**
16. **The narrator knows what awaits in the office**
17. **"Sterile" is a condemnation—the office is lifeless, dead**
18. **Joy existed before entering the office**
19. **Joy will not exist after entering**
20. **This has happened before (the narrator speaks from experience)**
21. **Others' joy has died here too—it's a known phenomenon**
22. **The narrator is powerless to prevent joy's death**
23. **The narrator must enter anyway despite knowing**
24. **Work/offices are incompatible with joy**
25. **The bird and the office are opposites—life vs. death**
26. **Modern life requires sacrificing what makes us alive**
27. **We are complicit in our own deadening**
28. **This pattern repeats regularly (daily? weekly?)**
29. **Awareness of the pattern doesn't break it**

The feel of this sentence comes from the way it combines these propositions—stated or unstated.

**What would this sentence look like if stated propositions had been combined differently?**

- I turn away from the bird and walk a couple of meters to the white office.
- The last couple of meters to the sterile white office are inevitable, so I turn away from the bird and walk.
- It's inevitable that this is where joy goes to die— the sterile white office waits just a couple of meters away, and I turn from the bird and walk.
- The office is white and sterile. It is the place where joy goes to die. I turn away from the bird and walk.
- I turn away from the bird. I walk the last couple of meters. The sterile white office is where joy goes to die. It's inevitable.
- The sterile white office where joy goes to die is only a couple of meters away—it's inevitable—so I turn away from the bird and walk.

**What if unstated propositions had been made more visible?**

- I don't want to turn away from the bird, but I do, walking those last couple of meters to the sterile white office where my joy goes to die—it happens every time, inevitable.
- I turn away from the bird—from flight, from freedom, from color—and walk the last couple of meters to the sterile white office where joy goes to die. It's inevitable.
- I am complicit: I turn away from the bird, I walk the last couple of meters, I enter the sterile white office where joy goes to die. I do it every day. It's inevitable, or maybe I just tell myself that.
- Outside: the bird. Inside: the sterile white office where joy goes to die. Between them, the last couple of meters. I turn away from one and walk toward the other. It's inevitable, this daily crossing from life to death.
- I've done this a hundred times before: turned away from the bird, walked the last couple of meters to the sterile white office where joy goes to die. I'll do it a hundred times more. It's inevitable—I know because I've tried to stop.

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So...what are your assumptions about reality? How do you combine/collide/detonate them on the page? What do you make visible? What do you leave beneath the surface?

That's your style.

Essayists work with propositions at multiple levels: within sentences, across paragraphs, and throughout entire essay structures. **The power/energy of your essay is, in large part, determined by the ways in which you combine, collide, and withhold the propositions your essay advances about reality.**

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I think this is also what Annie Dillard meant when she said **Aim for the block.**

*"Aim for the chopping block. If you aim for the wood, you will have nothing. Aim past the wood, aim through the wood; aim for the chopping block."*

– Annie Dillard, The Writing Life

...Meaning: Don't get distracted by the surface.

Meaning: Don't just rearrange words. Meaning: Dive deeper. What are you saying about reality?



## Three good ways to actively work with propositions

### 1. Layering

Stack propositions to build complexity and depth.

**Example:** "My father's hands, calloused and cracked, moved gently through my hair."

- Hands can be calloused
- Hands can be cracked
- Calluses suggest labor
- Despite roughness, the touch was gentle
- The touch moved through her hair
- The father is a man who cares about his daughter's hair
- **[Invisible: Tenderness can coexist with hardness]**
- **[Invisible: Working-class masculinity contains softness]**

**Difference:** "My father moved his calloused, cracked hands through my hair. He was a gentle man." / "My father's hands moved through my hair. They were calloused, cracked, but still felt gentle." / "Despite the roughness of my father's hands, they moved through my hair gently."

### 2. Collision

Place contradictory or unrelated propositions next to each other and let them spark.

**Example from Didion:** An empty Pepsi can "clatters across the terrazzo + "place is frozen in time" + (later) a marble star map "for all time and for all people who can read the stars."

**Propositions in collision:**

- Human trash exists / Cosmic time exists
- The temporary / The permanent
- The mundane / The sublime

The collision generates a feeling about human civilization's insignificance. Didion never explains this collision...she just creates it and lets the reader *feel*.

### 3. Withholding

Know your deepest proposition, but don't state it directly. Build toward it, circle it, let it emerge.

Didion's deepest propositions: (somewhat revealed) "The world after human extinction is sublime." / (unstated) "Progress is a myth."

She doesn't write that "she's obsessed with this dam because it represents the beautiful terror of a post-human world."

Instead she gives us a crescendo of circling, accumulating details, colliding propositions, until we *feel* at an intuitive level that progress is a myth, that all human strivings are *nothing* against the backdrop of infinite time.

## Two exercises I love

### Collision Exercise (i.e. Didion-ize a paragraph)

Didion's signature move is placing human kitsch against cosmic scale. Write a paragraph that does what Didion does:

1. Choose a proposition about something temporary/human/mundane in your essay
2. Choose a proposition about something permanent/inhuman/vast
3. Place them next to each other WITHOUT explaining the connection
4. Let the collision do the work

### Finding the hidden propositions

Grab an essay draft of yours—maybe one you're having trouble with—and do a proposition excavation. Pick a paragraph that feels important but murky, one you keep rewriting without knowing why.

List every proposition you're explicitly stating, then dig deeper: what are you assuming? What are you implying? What keeps appearing in different forms without ever being stated directly?

Write down that hidden proposition as plainly as you can—no poetry, no metaphor, just the bald claim about reality. Something like: "I am afraid my mother never loved me" or "I participated in my own erasure" or "Grief has no resolution." You don't have to use it explicitly in your essay, *but you need to know it*.

(What I often find in an essay that's not working is that a proposition I didn't realize I was working with is "fighting" with one of the propositions on the surface.)

Once you can see what you're circling, you can decide whether to reveal it, withhold it, or let it emerge through collision. This is the difference between writing that feels muddled (you don't know your own propositions), writing that feels preachy (you stated it too baldly), and writing that resonates (you know it and you're using it with intention).





## Propositions in the last Didion paragraph (a partial list):

1. There was something beyond energy and history
2. She could not fix this something in her mind
3. She came up from the dam that day
4. The wind was blowing harder
5. The wind blew through the canyon
6. The wind blew across the Mojave
7. Later there would be dust blowing toward Henderson and Las Vegas
8. The dust would blow past the Country-Western Casino
9. The casino advertises FRI & SAT NITES
10. The dust would blow past the Shrine of Our Lady of Safe Journey
11. The shrine says STOP & PRAY
12. At the dam there was no dust
13. There was only rock
14. There was the dam
15. There was a little greasewood
16. There were a few garbage cans (**Deeper: Human trash exists**)
17. The garbage can tops were chained
18. The cans banged against a fence
19. She walked across a marble star map
20. The star map traces a sidereal revolution of the equinox
21. The star map fixes forever the date the dam was dedicated (**Deeper: Cosmic time exists**)
22. The star map is for all people who can read stars
23. The Reclamation man told her this
24. The star map is for when we are all gone
25. The dam will be left
26. She had not thought much of this when he said it
27. She thought of it then
28. The wind was whining
29. The sun was dropping behind a mesa
30. The sunset had the finality of a sunset in space
31. This was the image she had always seen
32. She had seen it without quite realizing what she saw
33. **The dam is a dynamo finally free of man**
34. **The dam is splendid in its absolute isolation**
35. **The dam transmits power to a world where no one is**
36. **The dam releases water to a world where no one is**
37. **[UNSTATED: Human civilization will end]**
38. **[UNSTATED: The dam will outlast humanity]**
39. **[UNSTATED: This is what she finds beautiful/sublime]**
40. **[UNSTATED: Her obsession is about mortality and extinction]**