
Introduction

Why Teach Sentence Patterns?

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“What problems do you encounter when teaching writing to students?” For several years now, I have been collecting and categorizing answers to that question from thousands of teachers across the country. All of their answers can be gathered under four ideas. First, teachers consistently cite three student-related problems related to teaching writing: lack of motivation, lack of basic writing skills, and lack of content knowledge or information for writing topics. Teachers also cite their own lack of confidence concerning how to teach writing. Teachers seem to think of themselves as skilled readers, but most do not think of themselves as skilled writers.

When I completed my undergraduate degree, I took a host of methods classes. Not one of those classes dealt with methods of teaching writing. Teachers tell me that the same holds true for them. Thus, many teachers end up teaching writing the way that they were taught writing: worksheets, diagramming, and rewriting essays in ink after the teacher has corrected every possible error. Even though these teachers readily admit that they hated to write and have never felt successful as writers, they continue to use the very methods that left them bewildered and bored. Some tell me that they hated to diagram sentences. Others confess that they loved to diagram sentences, but admit that it taught them very little about writing. It did not give them the skills to create beautiful sentences. The teachers who liked diagramming are often the same ones who like to work puzzles, crosswords, or cryptograms. For them, diagramming was just one more puzzle to enjoy.

I have worked with hundreds of teachers who throw their hands in the air, shake their heads, and say, “We teach the grammar rules year after year, day in and day out. I have students who earn perfect scores on every worksheet we do, but they hand in essays riddled with errors. They just don’t care.” I think most students do care, but fixing obvious errors on a worksheet is a far cry from editing a paper. The skills do not transfer. If the worksheets and grammar drills are not working, then why continue to use them?

Teachers cite the pressures of high-stakes testing and the demands of the district as reasons for teaching grammar. I agree; we cannot thumb our nose at

those demands. Teachers mention the importance of knowing grammar because it is a mark of an educated person. I agree with that too. But I do wonder what teachers mean when they say *grammar*. Does knowing grammar mean labeling every word in a sentence? Does it mean knowing all the parts of speech? Does it mean diagramming? Reciting rules about spelling, punctuation, and capitalization—is that grammar? When we demand good grammar, are we talking about speech, writing, or both? Are there differences in the grammar of speech and the grammar used in writing?

If current methods are not working, then why continue using those methods? I began teaching sentence patterns in the 1980s and found that my students enjoyed working on the patterns. More importantly, they developed writing and grammar skills together. “Good grammar and good writing are not twins, but they are usually found in the same places.” (Provost, 2001, p. 44)

With the advent of the Common Core State Standards, the ability to write coherent essays and narratives will be crucial. Students will be required to “develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, CC.K-12.W.R.5. All rights reserved.). Knowing a range of patterns will give students the ability to revise sentences by adding or deleting information and by rearranging the elements of a sentence. The rules of standard written English are taught with each pattern so that students can edit their work.

Linguists cite eight major sentence patterns in the English language (Benjamin & Oliva, 2007). I think that can be simplified for our students by teaching two basic patterns: noun-verb (N-V) and noun-verb-noun (N-V-N). After all, noun-linking verb-noun is just a variation of noun-verb-noun. So I opted to focus on the two most concrete, most basic of the eight patterns. Once students can create those, they can then embed or add sentence elements to create a wide range of patterns. Let me demonstrate by embedding or adding sentence elements into one noun-verb sentence, “The dragon roared.” (See Figure 1.1.)

Figure 1.1 Sample Enhanced N-V Sentences

Element to Be Embedded	Enhanced Noun-Verb Sentence
Noun-Verb Sentence	The dragon roared.
Question	<i>Did</i> the dragon roar?
Opening Adverb	<i>Ferociously</i> , the dragon roared.
Prepositional Phrase	<i>In the morning</i> , the dragon roared.
Compound/Coordinator	The dragon roared, <i>and the knight retreated</i> .
Appositive	The dragon, <i>one of the king's pets</i> , roared.
Opening Adverb Clause	<i>Because his dinner was late</i> , the dragon roared.
Closing Adverb Clause	The dragon roared <i>because his dinner was late</i> .

Verbs in a Series	The dragon roared, <i>growled</i> , and <i>hissed</i> .
Opening Adjective	<i>Angry</i> , the dragon roared.
Adjective Phrase	<i>Grumpy because of a hangnail</i> , the dragon roared.
Infinitive	<i>To frighten the tourists</i> , the dragon roared.
Present Participle	<i>Glaring at the knight</i> , the dragon roared.
Past Participle	<i>Frustrated</i> , the dragon roared.
Perfect Present Participle	<i>Having burnt his dinner again</i> , the dragon roared.
Restrictive Clause	The dragon <i>that lives next door</i> roared.
Nonrestrictive Clause	The dragon, <i>who normally loves company</i> , roared.
Compound; Semicolon	The dragon roared; <i>the knight whimpered</i> .
Conjunctive Adverb	The dragon roared. <i>Nevertheless</i> , the knight approached his lair.
Absolute	The dragon, <i>his claws slashing the air</i> , roared.
Opening Series	<i>Tired, cold, and hungry</i> —the dragon roared.

The same sentence elements can be embedded into a noun-verb-noun sentence, as shown in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 Sample Enhanced N-V-N Sentences

Element to Be Embedded	Enhanced Noun-Verb-Noun Sentence
Noun-Verb-Noun Sentence	The astronaut repaired the Hubble.
Question	<i>Did</i> the astronaut repair the Hubble?
Opening Adverb	<i>Carefully</i> , the astronaut repaired the Hubble.
Prepositional Phrase	<i>On day three</i> , the astronaut repaired the Hubble.
Compound/Coordinator	The astronaut repaired the Hubble, <i>and mission control monitored the event</i> .
Appositive	The astronaut, <i>Dr. Megan McArthur</i> , repaired the Hubble.
Opening Adverb Clause	<i>Because the bolts had frozen</i> , the astronaut repaired the Hubble.
Closing Adverb Clause	The astronaut repaired the Hubble <i>because its bolts had frozen</i> .
Verbs in a Series	The astronaut repaired the Hubble, <i>collected data</i> , and <i>conducted a demonstration</i> .
Opening Adjective	<i>Confident</i> , the astronaut repaired the Hubble.
Adjective Phrase	<i>Nervous because of the fire</i> , the astronaut repaired the Hubble.
Infinitive	<i>To ensure clear photographs of the galaxy</i> , the astronaut repaired the Hubble.
Present Participle	<i>Struggling with the frozen bolts</i> , the astronaut repaired the Hubble.

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Past Participle	<i>Worried</i> , the astronaut repaired the Hubble.
Perfect Present Participle	<i>Having diagnosed the problem</i> , the astronaut repaired the Hubble.
Restrictive Clause	The astronaut <i>that waved to me at lift off</i> repaired the Hubble.
Nonrestrictive Clause	The astronaut, <i>who was on her fifth mission</i> , repaired the Hubble.
Compound; Semicolon	The astronaut repaired the Hubble; <i>the other crew members assisted her</i> .
Conjunctive Adverb	The astronaut repaired the Hubble. <i>Therefore</i> , NASA received clear pictures of the galaxy again.
Absolute	The astronaut, <i>arms growing weary</i> , repaired the Hubble.
Opening Series	<i>Tired, cold, and hungry</i> —the astronaut repaired the Hubble.

All of the above sentences in the figures have either N-V or N-V-N at the core. Once students understand those two basic patterns, they can imitate any of the new patterns by writing a basic sentence and then embedding or adding sentence elements. This empowers students to create a range of sentences. In addition, fixing fragments and run-on sentences becomes a student responsibility. I can help them to spot a run-on, but the student must deconstruct the sentence to determine the source of the problem. By crossing out sentence elements such as prepositional phrases, modifiers, and conjunctions, students can strip a sentence down to the basic sentence structure. Often they find that they have several N-V and N-V-N structures left. They can reconstruct those elements by selecting appropriate conjunctions and punctuation. The next step is to embed any necessary modifiers.

As early as third grade, the Common Core demands that students be able to “use linking words and phrases (e.g., because, therefore, since, for example) to connect opinion and reasons” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, CC.3.W.1.c. All rights reserved.). These skills are taught very explicitly with Patterns 5 through 9, which focus on prepositions, coordinating conjunctions, and subordinators (see Chapter 3). Subsequent patterns demonstrate the use of adjective clauses and verbals. All of these patterns are critical to linking ideas and phrases in a well-constructed piece of text.

My students were never given a prescription that dictates the number of words per sentence, the number of sentences per paragraph, nor the number of paragraphs per essay or narrative. The sentence patterns give students the skills to create original sentences that express their ideas and knowledge. Students learn to write through imitation. They study an author’s craft and techniques. Once they have reached a comfort level with the patterns, I encourage students to play. Combine patterns, move embedded elements to new positions, take risks, make decisions, let voice evolve. Be an author.

Teaching Parts of Speech

2

For the following smorgasbord of activities, students will need a basic understanding of nouns and verbs. If they understand that a noun is a name for a person, place, or thing, and that a verb is an action word, they can complete these activities. Older students might understand that abstract words, such as *teamwork*, *maturity*, or *responsibility* are also nouns, but that information is not crucial at this point. The idea behind these activities is that students will develop an understanding of the concept of nouns, verbs, and other sentence elements as they work. It has been my experience that most students can recite definitions and even recognize noun and verbs—skills at the lowest levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy. The goal is to have students who can discuss and manipulate nouns and verbs to create the two basic sentence patterns noun-verb and noun-verb-noun.

ACTIVITIES FOR NOUNS AND VERBS

Some of the activities might seem ridiculously simple, but sometimes ridiculously simple is exactly what a student needs. These activities will build the foundation for the sentence patterns. I have found that once students can generate a bank of nouns and verbs and use that bank to create the two basic patterns, they will be able to create the remaining patterns with little difficulty. So do not rush; never assume knowledge. Make sure that students understand the nature of a noun, the nature of a verb, and how to use them to create ridiculously simple sentences that will soon blossom into more complex structures.

The ability to use specific nouns and verbs in effective sentence structures forms the basis for good writing. Harry Noden, author of *Image Grammar*, says that once students understand the power of nouns and verbs, they can transform their writing to vivid photography. “Their use of specific nouns and verbs breathes life into cold corpse images” (Noden, 1999, p. 26). It is not enough to tell students to use specific nouns and vivid verbs. We must teach the skills: build vocabulary, develop an eye for the weak word, develop an ear for rhythm, and revise willingly.