

Sentences

The Basic Building Blocks of Writing

If you were building a house, would you start with the roof? Probably not. But for far too long, I was attempting to do just that with my writing assignments.

A student I'll call Roger was in the eighth grade—well past the point where he should have learned to write a good, clear sentence. But somehow, he was still struggling to produce one. Some of his sentences continued on and on—maybe with a comma where there should have been a period, maybe with no punctuation whatsoever—trailing off only when he seemed to run out of energy. At other times, his sentences were short and dull, each repeating the same simple structure. Sometimes his “sentences” lacked a subject or a verb. Sometimes I had no idea what he was trying to say.

But Roger was in the eighth grade, and so I felt I had to assign him—and his classmates who were having similar problems—paragraphs and compositions to write. When I returned these written pieces to Roger, I would point out the run-on sentences, the fragments, the sentences that

didn't say much of anything, and ask him to do better next time. But it didn't seem to make any difference. The next time I assigned Roger a paragraph or a composition, the same sentence-level problems would stubbornly appear.

Eventually I realized that if I wanted my students to write good paragraphs and compositions, I was going to need to start building a solid foundation first—just the way I would start building a house. And in writing, that foundation consists of **sentences**.

The importance of spending plenty of instructional time working with sentences can't be stressed enough. Sentence-level work is the engine that will propel your students from writing the way they speak to using the structures of written language. Once they begin to construct more sophisticated sentences, they'll enhance not only their writing skills but also their reading comprehension.¹ And sentence-level work will lay the groundwork for your students' ability to revise and edit when they tackle longer forms of writing.

Clearly, not all sentences are the same. Some are far more informative, complex, and interesting to read than others. Many students, when asked to compose a sentence, are likely to write something like this:

The Union Army won.

The goal of TWR sentence-level strategies and the activities that support them are to enable students to write something more like this:

In April 1865, the Union Army, a well-trained and well-equipped force, won a decisive battle against the Confederates at the Battle of Appomattox Court House.

The second sentence has an appositive, is expanded to answer the questions *where*, *when* and *why*, and has a subordinating conjunction introducing a dependent clause. If you teach all of these elements explicitly through TWR sentence-level strategies, it will enable your students to construct far more sophisticated and informative responses.

The second sentence also demonstrates far more content knowledge than the first one—content knowledge that students can express only if they're actually learning it. When giving students any writing assignment, including those at the sentence level, first ensure that your students have sufficient knowledge or resources at their disposal to write intelligently about the subject at hand. That means you'll need to figure out in advance what you want your students to understand as a result of the activity and plan backward from that goal.²

Make It Correct: Using Sentence Activities to Teach Grammar and Conventions

As we've mentioned, your best bet for teaching your students the grammar and conventions of English is to do it in the context of their writing. And the best way to do that is through sentence activities. If you wait until they're writing paragraphs and compositions, the number of mechanical errors can be overwhelming, for you and for your students. Of course we don't expect students to master all the conventions of written English at once, but there's no reason to hold off on gradually introducing the rudiments.

If you're working with Level 1 students, you may need to start by teaching them to begin each sentence with a capital letter and end it with a period. As your students progress, you can introduce the use of question marks and exclamation points. Once they have a grasp of those conventions, you can begin to focus on the capitalization of **proper nouns**.

When introducing students to the first **subordinating conjunctions** they'll encounter—*before*, *after*, *if*, and *when*—show them that the comma should go after the dependent clause at the beginning of the sentence. For example:

Before I go to bed, I always brush my teeth.

A subordinating conjunction introduces a **dependent (subordinate) clause** and signals the relationship between that clause and the main idea. Subordinating conjunctions are often used in written language, and they are more likely to appear at the beginning of a sentence in writing than in speech.

For example, in the sentence, "Although it is raining, I'm going to take a walk," the subordinating conjunction is *although*. Together with "it is raining," it forms a dependent clause. When speaking, we would be more likely to say, "I know it's raining, but I'm going to take a walk anyway."

For Level 1 students, it's best not to use technical grammatical terms such as *subordinating conjunction* or *dependent clause* when explaining the placement of the comma. Simply give them examples of sentences using these words and point out where the comma goes. Of course, as with other conventions, you'll also need to ensure that students are placing commas correctly in their own writing.

Some grammatical errors may be quite persistent—for example, using a **verb** form that doesn't agree with the subject of a sentence, as in "They was going to school." This is a particular problem with students who are

still learning English or who speak non-standard English. As an initial approach, it's a good idea to highlight the most common mistakes and bring them to the attention of the class as a whole. But that's unlikely to solve the problem. You will also need to correct the mistakes as they appear in students' own writing—as they almost inevitably will continue to do.

TECHNICAL TIP

As you introduce the sentence activities in this chapter to your students, you should keep the following points in mind:

- When introducing a new activity, model it for students first.
- Have students practice sentence-level activities orally as well as in writing, even if you're teaching older students.
- Embed the sentence activities in the content you're teaching.
- Differentiate the activities for students at different ability levels while covering the same content.
- When planning activities, write out the responses you anticipate getting from students and make sure your directions and questions are clear.
- Plan your instruction so that your students will have the content knowledge they need to practice the activity successfully.
- As you progress through the sequence of activities, have students keep practicing TWR activities you've already covered to build on the skills they've acquired. You can use a number of different sentence activities at the same time.

What Makes a Sentence a Sentence: Fragments, Scrambled Sentences, and Run-Ons

Practicing sentence-defining and sentence-ordering activities:

- Helps students understand the concept of a complete sentence and discern sentence boundaries
- Helps students understand correct word order
- Provides practice with capitalization, punctuation, and using new spelling and vocabulary words
- Serves as a comprehension check
- Helps students understand the meanings of subjects, predicates, and prepositional phrases
- Encourages careful reading

A **fragment** is a group of words that is not a grammatically complete sentence. Usually a fragment lacks a subject, verb, or both, or it is a dependent clause that is not connected to an independent clause (for example, “Although I read the book”). A **phrase** is a group of words in a sentence that does not contain a verb and its subject. For example, in the sentence, “The teacher, a recent arrival to the school, was happy because I did my homework,” “a recent arrival to the school” is a phrase.

A sentence consists of a group of words that includes a **subject** and a **predicate** and that expresses a complete thought. Students who haven’t yet developed good writing skills often struggle with the concept of a complete sentence. We all use sentence fragments or incomplete sentences in spoken language, and students may continue to use them as they learn to write.

If you’ve tried to explain the concept of a sentence to students by giving them a definition to memorize—for example, “A set of words that is complete in itself, typically containing a subject and predicate, conveying a statement, question, exclamation, or command, and consisting of a main clause and sometimes one or more subordinate clauses”³—you’ve probably discovered that approach doesn’t work very well. Simply learning to repeat the definition of a sentence won’t help most students learn to craft one. It’s far too abstract an exercise. They need to spend time hearing and reading complete sentences alongside sentence fragments and distinguishing between the two. And teachers need to ask their students questions about fragments that will guide them to turn the fragments into complete sentences.

When you introduce your students to the concept of a complete sentence as opposed to a fragment, it’s helpful to explain that fragments may be fine in conversation but that written speech requires more precision. Then give students examples of sentence fragments and ask them to correct them by supplying whatever element is missing. Your students may need a lot of practice working with examples you provide before they can recognize fragments in their own writing.

Start With Speaking: Oral Activities With Fragments

Initially, when you give examples of fragments, it’s best to present them orally rather than in writing. For example, you might say to the class:

ate a great meal

To guide them to supply a subject, you could follow that up with, “Does that tell us *who* ate a great meal? How can we make these words into a complete sentence?”

Another example could be:

Robert and Jack

You might say, “we need to know *what they did*. Let’s make this fragment into a complete sentence.” Students would then supply a verb (such as *ate*) and perhaps a predicate (*a great meal*) to create a sentence.

You can also give your students oral examples of fragments that are related to the content they’re studying. These examples can be more or less challenging, depending on the complexity of the content and the knowledge demands of the fragment you choose to give them. When you make up fragments, you’ll need to anticipate the correct responses and be sure that your students have the knowledge they need to correct them.

Level 1 Example

Let’s say you’ve been teaching your students about early settlement in the American colonies, and you’re not too sure of their grasp of the material. You might give them this fragment:

settled near rivers

Your students could then draw on the content they’ve learned to turn the fragment into a sentence, such as the following:

Early Americans settled near rivers.

Level 2 Example

If you’re teaching a higher-level class on the history of the early American republic and you’re fairly confident your students have some command of the interplay between the founders—particularly the role played by Alexander Hamilton—you might give them this fragment:

developed a set of principles

They might respond:

Alexander Hamilton developed a set of principles that explained how the new nation would be governed.

With Level 1 students, you’ll want to avoid using technical grammatical terms such as *subject*, *verb*, and *predicate*, which may just confuse them.

If you're teaching Level 2 students, though, you might say, "The subject (or predicate) is missing in this fragment. Can you make it into a complete sentence?"

Put It in Writing: Written Activities With Fragments

Once your students are familiar with distinguishing fragments from sentences through oral practice, it's time to have them practice with written examples.

Fragments or Sentences?

Begin by giving your students a list that includes fragments and complete sentences, and have them mark the sentences with an *S* and the fragments with an *F*. They should also convert the fragments into complete sentences with appropriate capitalization and punctuation. When creating the examples, be careful not to capitalize or punctuate either the fragments or the sentences.

As always, when you embed this activity in content, you'll need to make sure your students already have the information they'll need to turn the fragments into sentences. This activity will also alert you to gaps in students' knowledge and comprehension.

Level 1 Example

If you've been teaching your students about the story of Columbus, you could give them a list such as the following:

- ___ queen isabella and king ferdinand
- ___ columbus never reached
- ___ the sailors were tired and frightened
- ___ in three small ships
- ___ columbus an italian sailor

After marking these examples *F* or *S*, students should convert the fragments into sentences at the bottom of the page and add the correct punctuation and capitalization to the sentences.

Level 2 Example

Let's say you're a math teacher with a pre-algebra class and you want to review rational numbers—while also helping your students develop an understanding of sentences. You might give them the following two

fragments and ask them to correct them with proper punctuation and capitalization:

can be expressed as a fraction or a ratio

rational numbers

Their responses might be:

A rational number is a number that can be expressed as a fraction or a ratio.

Rational numbers can be ordered on a number line.

BE CAREFUL

Keep the following points in mind when you're creating sentence fragment activities for your students:

- When you give students isolated written examples, don't capitalize or punctuate either the fragments or the sentences. For example, give students the fragment "in the forest" rather than "In the forest." Similarly, give them the sentence "the bear lived in the forest" rather than "The bear lived in the forest." Capitalizing and punctuating only the sentences would be a dead giveaway as to which examples are which!
- Be sure not to use commands (e.g., "ride bikes") when you're giving students examples of fragments. Commands can be complete sentences.
- Similarly, avoid using **kernel sentences** (e.g., "they fought") as examples of fragments, because they are in fact complete sentences.

Find the Fragment: Embedding Fragments in Text

In addition to giving your students isolated written examples of fragments, have them find and correct fragments that are embedded in sample texts. Unlike the isolated examples, fragments that are embedded in text should be capitalized and punctuated, as in the following examples for different ability levels. Have students underline the fragments, as shown in the examples, and then turn them into complete sentences.

Level 1 Example

If your students have been studying colonial-era clothing, you could give them a passage like the following, which you've modified to include fragments. Your students will need enough knowledge to supply the missing information in the fragments.

A colonist's outfit began with underwear. But underwear wasn't what you might expect. All colonial men wore long-sleeved white under-

shirts that reached their knees. Women and children wore shifts instead of. A shift was a long-sleeved dress that fell below the knees. No one bothered with boxers or briefs. Underwear wasn't common in America until.⁴

After your students have underlined the two fragments in the text, they might convert them to the following complete sentences:

Women and children wore shifts instead of skirts.

Underwear wasn't common in America until the 1830s.

Level 2 Example

After your students have been studying the Holy Roman Empire for a while, you could give them a passage like this:

A year before Charlemagne died in 814, he crowned his only surviving son, Louis the Pious, as emperor. Louis was a devoutly religious man but an ineffective ruler. He left three sons: Lothair, Charles the Bald, and Louis the German. They fought one another for. In 843, the brothers signed the Treaty of Verdun, dividing the empire into three kingdoms. As a result, Carolingian kings. The lack of strong rulers led to a new system of governing and landholding—feudalism.⁵

Your students could convert the fragments they've underlined to complete sentences such as the following:

They fought one another for control of the empire.

As a result, Carolingian kings lost power and central authority broke down.

Piece It Together: Unscrambling Scrambled Sentences

Students enjoy rearranging jumbled sequences of words into correctly punctuated and capitalized sentences. At the same time, they're developing and honing their grasp of the concept of a complete sentence, learning correct word order, and reinforcing their knowledge of the rules of punctuation and capitalization. When you embed the activity in the content you've been teaching, your students also will be deepening their understanding of that content and of new vocabulary words they've learned.

Scrambled sentences can include statements, questions, and exclamations. It's best to avoid using commands, especially with Level 1 or

younger students. With commands—such as “Get the book”—the subject (*you*) is implied rather than stated explicitly, and that can be confusing.

For Level 1 students who need additional support, consider capitalizing the first word of the sentence or writing it in bold letters. Try to use between six and nine words per sentence for Level 1 students and up to 9 or 10 for Level 2 students.

Level 1 Examples

Here are some examples of scrambled sentences with anticipated student responses. In the first example, we’ve put the first word in bold as an example of how you can help students who need more support.

apples **Tim** oranges bought and bananas

Tim bought apples, oranges, and bananas.

divided twenty-one equals by seven three

Twenty-one divided by three equals seven.

away yellow the did bird why fly

Why did the yellow bird fly away?

Level 2 Examples

functions take in life cytoplasm most the place

Most life functions take place in the cytoplasm.

Dill summer Scout in 1933 the of and Jem met

In the summer of 1933, Scout and Jem met Dill.

advocate passive against the British why Gandhi did for resistance

Why did Gandhi advocate for passive resistance against the British?

Put the Brakes On: Correcting Run-On Sentences

Run-on sentences are an all-too-frequent problem in student writing. Although there’s no quick solution, we have found a few effective ways to help students become aware of run-ons and learn how to correct them.

If your students have trouble with run-ons, try putting a run-on sentence on the board daily, preferably embedded in content or relating to a

subject students already know something about. When you first start this routine, ask a student to read the sentence aloud, without pausing, and then ask the class what's wrong with it. After doing this a few times, you can just put run-ons on the board and have students correct them without hearing them read aloud. You'll want to continue to do this as a daily activity until you stop seeing run-ons in your students' writing.

If the word *and* is the biggest culprit in the run-ons your students write, tell them to go back and look at every *and* they've put into a sentence. Have them ask themselves whether they're joining two ideas that should be in separate sentences.

You can use a variety of techniques to give your students practice in correcting run-ons: do-now activities, exit slips (tickets), and in the earlier grades, **turn-and-talk**. As with sentence fragments, you can also embed run-ons in text and have the students identify, underline, and correct them.

Introduce Some Variety: The Four Basic Sentence Types

Practicing sentence-type activities does the following:

- Enables students to vary sentence structure
- Provides one way to improve topic and concluding sentences in a paragraph
- Introduces students to forming questions
- Helps students learn correct punctuation

All sentences, no matter how complex, can be boiled down to these four types:

- **Declarative sentence (statement):** the most common type of sentence; a statement of an idea or argument

Example: Theodore Roosevelt created five national parks.

- **Imperative sentence (command):** gives advice or instructions or expresses a request or command

Example: Describe the effects of the many visitors to national parks.

- **Interrogative sentence (question):** asks a question and always ends with a question mark

Example: How can the national parks be protected?

- **Exclamatory sentence (exclamation):** expresses force or a strong emotion and ends with an exclamation point

Example: We must save the national parks!

Introducing students to the four sentence types will pay off when it comes time for them to write paragraphs and essays and you ask them to vary their sentence structure. You can simply suggest that they write one of the sentence types as a topic or concluding sentence.

You can also use sentence-type activities to teach punctuation. For example, you can give students different types of unpunctuated sentences and ask them to add the appropriate punctuation. If one sentence says, “Are you coming,” students will need to add a question mark. If another says, “Get over here,” they need to add an exclamation point or perhaps a period.

Another way to use sentence-type activities is for vocabulary and spelling practice. If you are teaching the root word *retract*, for example, you can ask students to write a statement, a command, and a question using the word in any of its forms. Students might give the following answers:

The teacher retracted what she had said.

Retract that statement.

Will he retract that remark?

Getting to Know the Sentence Types

After explaining the four different sentence types, have your students practice distinguishing between them. You might give them the following activity:

Identify the sentence type:

___ I don't want to go.

___ Do you want to go?

___ I'm not going!

___ Go now.

One way of helping students understand the different types of sentences is to ask them to change questions into statements and vice-versa. For example:

Change this statement into a question: Sam is coming with us.

Change this question into a statement: Did she take the dog for a walk?

Using Sentence Types in Writing

Once your students have a grasp of the different sentence types, they can start formulating sentence types in their own writing.

Level 1 Example

If your students have been studying immigration, you can ask them to write a question using the word *immigrants*, a statement using *Ellis Island*, an exclamation using *freedom*, and a command using *citizen*. Students might write the following sentences in response:

Are your grandparents immigrants?

Many immigrants were documented at Ellis Island.

We are so fortunate to have freedom in this country!

Become a citizen now, if you aren't one already.

You may want to omit the command sentence from the activity, depending on the topic. Often, topics having to do with the past don't lend themselves to commands.

Level 2 Example

Let's say your students have been doing a unit on the International Space Station. You might ask them to write four sentences on the topic, using each of the four sentence types, without providing them with prompting words. They might write:

The International Space Station is the largest and most complex international scientific undertaking in history.

How many crew members live and work at the International Space Station?

Almost an acre of solar panels provides electrical power to state-of-the-art laboratories!

Continue the space program.

HOW TO DIFFERENTIATE SENTENCE-TYPE ACTIVITIES

If some of your students need extra support or additional challenge, here are some possible modifications:

- Ask more advanced students to create all four sentence types, while asking others to create only two.
 - Give struggling students prompts with specific words to use in each sentence type, but ask others to create their sentences from scratch.
-

What Do You Know? Developing Questions

Practicing question activities does the following:

- Encourages students to think about the important features in text
- Encourages close reading
- Helps students to focus on the key elements of questions
- Gives students practice in understanding and using expository terms
- Helps students anticipate what questions they may be asked

It's as important for students to learn how to generate questions as it is for them to learn how to answer them. When students formulate questions, they're developing higher-level cognitive functions while at the same time focusing on the main idea of the content that provides the basis of their question.

Imagine, for example, that you needed to formulate a question about the paragraph you just read. You might need to read it several times, asking yourself what it's really all about. Perhaps you'd come up with the following:

Why is it important for students to learn how to generate questions?

Or:

What skills or abilities do students develop when they learn to formulate questions?

If you embed question activities in the content your students are learning, you'll spur them to read and reread text closely and think deeply about what they're learning while at the same time developing their writing skills.

Worth a Thousand Words: Developing Questions About Pictures

An excellent way of introducing your students to the skill of developing questions is to show them a picture and ask them to come up with two or three questions based on what they see. If the picture is related to the content of the curriculum—for example, a political cartoon or a depiction of a historical event in a history class—you'll be able to probe your students' understanding of it. This activity can also serve as a good introduction to a topic, piquing your students' curiosity and giving you insight into their background knowledge.

EXHIBIT 1.1

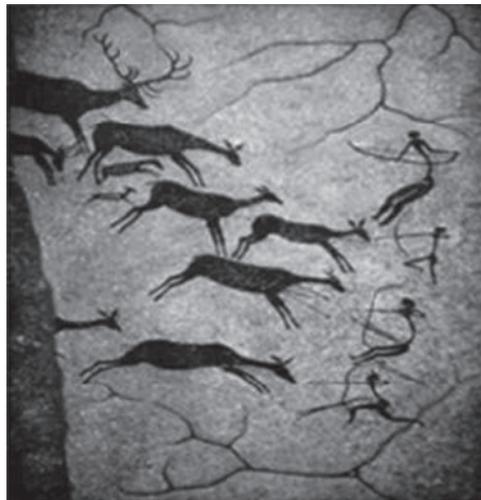
Write a question about the picture.



Who are the dogs waiting for?

EXHIBIT 1.2**Paleolithic Age**

Directions: Write two questions about the picture.



1. What civilization made this cave painting?

2. When was this cave painting made?

Level 1 Example

You could give your Level 1 students the picture shown in Exhibit 1.1 to practice developing questions. They might write the question, “Who are the dogs waiting for?”

Level 2 Example

If your Level 2 class has been studying the Paleolithic era, you could give them the activity as shown in Exhibit 1.2.

Test Yourself: Developing Questions About Content

If you’re teaching Level 2 students, try asking them to write essay questions they think might appear on an upcoming test. You can tell students that if their question is selected for use on the test, they’ll get bonus points.

You can also ask Level 1 or 2 students to develop comprehension questions after reading a text. This activity can be expanded to allow students to write commands as well as questions, using **expository terms** such as *discuss*, *explain*, *justify*, or *describe*. A list of terms used to describe different types of **expository writing** can be found in Appendix A (“Expository Writing Terms”).

Students might write the following:

Describe the formation of igneous rock.

Trace the events leading up to the War of 1812.

Explain the continuing public interest in The Diary of Anne Frank.

Let’s Play Jeopardy: Giving Students Answers and Asking for Questions

Another good exercise is to provide students with answers relating to a text they’ve read and having them write questions to go with them. For example, you might give them the word *abolitionists*. The student response might be as follows:

What term was used to describe people opposed to slavery?

Ask your students to make their questions as precise as possible. For example:

Q. _____

A. 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

The question should be, “Where is the White House?” or “Where does the president of the United States live?” The question, “Where does the president live?” isn’t specific enough.

Conjunctions, Complexity, and Clauses

Practicing conjunction activities does the following:

- Develops the ability to write extended responses
- Checks student comprehension
- Develops analytical and deeper thinking
- Fosters close reading
- Assesses the ability to use new vocabulary words correctly
- Develops the ability to craft linguistically complex sentences that use written rather than oral language conventions
- Enhances reading comprehension by familiarizing students with more complex syntax and sentence structure
- Provides a way to develop topic and concluding sentences

Conjunctions include words such as *and*, *because*, and *but*. Using conjunctions to connect words, phrases, and clauses helps make writing clear and linguistically rich. It also provides more information to the reader.

A **clause** is a group of words in a sentence that contains a subject and a verb. There are two types of clauses:

- An **independent (main) clause** represents a complete thought and can stand alone as a sentence. For example, in the sentence, “The teacher was happy because I did my homework,” “The teacher was happy” is an independent clause.
- A dependent (subordinate) clause does not express a complete thought and could not stand alone as a complete sentence. In the previous example, “because I did my homework” is a dependent clause.

Much of what students hear, read, and write in their everyday lives is couched in simple language and structures. But much of what they’re expected to read in school, especially at higher grade levels, is linguistically complex.

The large amber windows were open, and the fish swam in, just as the swallows fly into our houses when we open the windows, excepting

that the fishes swam up to the princesses, ate out of their hands, and allowed themselves to be stroked.⁶

Somewhere in the dead of the southern night my life had switched onto the wrong track and, without my knowing it, the locomotive of my heart was rushing down a dangerously steep slope, heading for a collision, heedless of the warning red lights that blinked all about me, the sirens and the bells and the screams that filled the air.⁷

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.⁸

When confronted with complexity in literature, expository text, and original documents, students often have difficulty extracting the text's meaning. Conjunction activities enable students to craft more complex sentences themselves. As they do so, they also develop the ability to understand such sentences when they encounter them in their reading.⁹

The Power of Basic Conjunctions: *Because, But, and So*

A popular—and powerful—TWR sentence activity is what has become known as *because-but-so*. It's a great illustration of how an exercise that seems simple can actually require students to think analytically. It's also the first conjunction activity you should give to your students.

Here's how it works: You'll give students a **sentence stem**—the beginning of a sentence—and ask them to turn it into three separate **complex sentences**, using each conjunction in turn. This approach requires them to engage in far more specific and focused thinking than just asking them to respond to an open-ended question. Think about the difference between asking students, "Why do seeds need light to grow?" and framing the assignment as follows:

Seeds need light to grow because _____.

Seeds need light to grow, but _____.

Seeds need light to grow, so _____.

Make sure your students understand the meanings of each conjunction. You could explain it to them this way:

- *Because* explains why something is true.
- *But* indicates a change of direction—similar to a U-turn.
- *So* tells us what happens as a result of something else—in other words, a cause and its effect.

As with other TWR activities, the content of *because-but-so* drives its rigor. When you adapt the activity to the content you're teaching, be sure to anticipate student responses and ensure that your students have enough content knowledge to complete the activity successfully.

In addition to guiding your students to create complex sentences, this activity will prod them to think critically and deeply about the content they're studying—far more so than if you simply asked them to write a sentence in answer to an open-ended question. At the same time, *because-but-so* activities will provide you with a more precise check of your students' comprehension.

You can also use this activity to give students practice with new vocabulary or spelling words. Just embed those words in the stems you create, or have your students embed them in the complex sentences they write. For example, if your students have just learned the word *mediocre*, you can give them the following sentence stems:

The critic thought the book was mediocre because _____.

The critic thought the book was mediocre, but _____.

The critic thought the book was mediocre, so _____.

Level 1 Example

With Level 1 students, practice this activity orally before having students try it in writing. It's also best to begin with just one conjunction at a time—students generally find *because* the easiest to use.

To introduce the idea, start with a simple stem that is not based in the content you're teaching—for example, "The teacher was happy _____." Students might respond orally with answers such as these:

The teacher was happy because we raised our hands.

The teacher was happy, but she still gave us homework.

The teacher was happy, so she gave us a longer recess.

Once your students have gotten the hang of the concept, it's time to embed the activity in content. If your class is studying Abraham Lincoln, you could give students the stem, "Abraham Lincoln was a great president _____." The activity would look like this:

Abraham Lincoln was a great president because _____.

Abraham Lincoln was a great president, but _____.

Abraham Lincoln was a great president, so _____.

Student responses might be as follows:

Abraham Lincoln was a great president because he kept the North united during the Civil War.

Abraham Lincoln was a great president, but many Americans didn't like him while he was alive.

Abraham Lincoln was a great president, so more books have been written about him than any other American leader.

Level 2 Example

Let's say you're teaching students about American composers and they've recently been learning about George Gershwin. You could use the stem "George Gershwin is considered a musical genius _____." Their response might look like this:

George Gershwin is considered a musical genius because he captured and expressed the spirit of American life in his rhythms, harmonies, and melodies.

George Gershwin is considered a musical genius, but some have criticized him for the structural weaknesses in some of his works.

George Gershwin is a musical genius, so many composers have tried to emulate his style.

BE CAREFUL

Keep the following points in mind when creating and assigning *because-but-so* activities:

- It is extremely important to anticipate your students' responses when developing activities with these conjunctions. Always try completing the stems yourself before asking your students to do so.
- Explain to students that in this activity, the word *so* isn't being used in the sense of "I like Abraham Lincoln so much." Instead, it introduces a phrase that tells us what happened as a result of something else.

- Not every text will lend itself to activities using all three conjunctions. For example, if a text provides only positive information about Abraham Lincoln’s presidency, students will have difficulty completing the *but* sentence shown in the example. In that case, you should only give students the conjunctions *because* and *so*.
- Don’t let students use *because*, *but*, and *so* at the beginnings of sentences. If they do, they’re likely to write a fragment rather than a complete sentence. As they become more competent writers, they can begin to use these conjunctions to start sentences.

HOW TO DIFFERENTIATE CONJUNCTION ACTIVITIES

You can easily modify the *because-but-so* activity to differentiate your instruction for students at different ability levels. You can give all students the same stem but ask more advanced students to provide complete sentences for all three conjunctions while asking others to write a sentence for only one or two. For example, you could have struggling students use only the conjunction *because* and more advanced students also tackle *but*. Using *but* requires students to juggle two contrasting ideas and can be a more difficult task, depending on the stem.

How to Say It in Writing: Subordinating Conjunctions

Practicing subordinating conjunction activities does the following:

- Promotes the use of complex sentences
- Improves reading comprehension
- Enables students to vary sentence types
- Boosts vocabulary development
- Encourages close reading and references to text
- Checks student comprehension
- Enables students to extend their responses
- Provides a good option for topic and concluding sentences

Here are the subordinating conjunctions used most frequently to begin written sentences, listed in the order in which they are taught to Level 1 students:

- | | |
|----------------|--------------|
| 1. before | 6. although |
| 2. after | 7. since |
| 3. if | 8. while |
| 4. when | 9. unless |
| 5. even though | 10. whenever |

Most students don't use subordinating conjunctions such as *although* in their spoken language—especially at the beginning of a sentence, as the introduction to a dependent clause—so they may not know what some of these conjunctions mean or how to use them. If they encounter such constructions in their reading, that lack of familiarity can interfere with their comprehension. When students learn to use this kind of syntax in their own writing, they become better able to understand complex texts, and their oral language becomes more sophisticated as well.

Once your students learn to use subordinating conjunctions, they'll also be able to write extended responses that are rich in complexity and content. When they begin writing paragraphs and essays, they can use subordinating conjunctions to create topic or concluding sentences that are interesting and full of information. Several of these conjunctions—such as *while*, *although*, and *even though*—are particularly useful in composing argumentative or persuasive writing.

Although We've Never Met . . .: Introducing Your Students to Subordinating Conjunctions

To develop your students' skill in using subordinating conjunctions, give them introductory dependent clauses that you've created and ask them to complete the sentences. As with sentence stems using *because-but-so*, this approach demands more analytical thinking and precision than merely asking open-ended questions.

For example, there is a significant difference between asking a student this question:

Why was the Industrial Revolution important?

and asking them to complete the following sentences:

Although the Industrial Revolution was important, _____.

Before the Industrial Revolution, _____.

To finish a stem that begins with *although*, students need to find contrasting or contradictory information. When using a subordinating conjunction such as *before*, students need to demonstrate their understanding of the chronology of events.

Obviously, students will need to have knowledge of the content in order to successfully complete activities with subordinating conjunctions.

Level 1 Examples

Students in primary grades can practice completing stems based on books you've introduced in read-alouds. They can complete the stems either orally or in writing. With Level 1 students, it's best to start with conjunctions that depend on chronology (*before, after, when*) or the conjunction *if*.

If you've been reading them the book *How Rocket Learned to Read*,¹⁰ for example, you could give them stems based on the story. The stems and the answers students provide might look like these:

Before Rocket heard the story about the dog, he wasn't interested in learning to read.

After Rocket listened to part of the story, he wanted to know if the dog found the bone.

When Rocket learned to read, he was excited and proud.

If you've read your students a book about penguins, the stems and answers might look like these:

After emperor penguins build nests, they have babies on the sea ice.

If sea ice melts, penguins won't have enough food.

Before the late 1980s, there were a lot more Adelie penguins.

Level 2 Examples

If you're teaching English and your students have been reading *Of Mice and Men*, you might give them the following stems to complete, and they might provide the answers shown:

Since Lennie has a mild mental disability, George looks out for him.

After Lennie meets Curley's wife, George warns him to stay away from her.

Although Lennie promised to keep the farm a secret, he tells Crooks about it.

In math class, the stems and answers might look as follows:

If a mid-segment touches a side, then it bisects it.

Since the side that the mid-segment does not touch is 22 units long, the mid-segment must be 11 units long.

Although a mid-segment is half as long as the side it does NOT touch, it is not necessarily half as long as the side it does touch.

Once students have become more familiar with this structure, you can make the exercise more difficult by giving them just a subordinating conjunction and a term and asking them to create a complex sentence. Be sure to tell students to *begin* the sentence with the subordinating conjunction. For example, in science class you might give them:

Unless hydrogen _____.

A student answer might be:

Unless hydrogen and oxygen form a compound, they are explosive and dangerous.

Another Name for a Noun: Appositives

Practicing appositive activities does the following:

- Provides an effective strategy for creating topic and concluding sentences
- Enables students to vary sentence structure
- Enables students to include more information in a sentence and add complexity
- Improves reading comprehension
- Enables teachers to check for comprehension
- Encourages careful reading
- Familiarizes students with a form that is often seen in text and rarely heard in spoken language

An **appositive** is a second **noun**, or a phrase or clause equivalent to a noun, that is placed beside another noun to explain it more fully. For example:

New York City, the largest city in the United States, is a major tourist attraction.

In that sentence, the appositive is “the largest city in the United States.”

Although appositives can include verbs in some circumstances, this activity should be limited to appositives that don’t include verbs. Tell your students to use “the largest city in the United States,” not “*which is* the largest city in the United States. The latter is actually a relative clause, not an appositive. An appositive usually follows the noun it describes, as

in the example, but it can also precede it (“The largest city in the United States, New York City, is a major tourist attraction.”)

In addition to sentence types and subordinating conjunctions, appositives are a third strategy that will help students compose complex and interesting topic sentences when they write paragraphs and compositions. Level 1 and younger students (below third or fourth grade) may have trouble grasping the concept of appositives. They may confuse them with relative clauses, which begin with *who* or *which* and include a verb. You’ll need to use your judgment about whether your students are ready to be introduced to appositives.

Identifying, Matching, and Creating Appositives

To introduce appositives, give students examples of sentences containing them and have them underline the appositives. When creating examples, remember that for these activities, an appositive should not include a verb.

To help students identify the appositive in a sentence, tell them that it’s a phrase that can be removed or covered up without making the entire sentence incomplete. If we omitted the phrase, “the largest city in the United States,” in the previous example, we would still have a complete sentence:

New York City is a major tourist attraction.

You could also tell students that an appositive defines or describes a person, place, or thing.

Once students have begun to grasp the concept of an appositive, you’ll want to start embedding activities in content. For example, you can create a matching activity based on a text your class has been studying: List nouns from the text on one-half of a sheet of paper and appositives on the other, and have students match each noun with the appositive that best describes it.

For example, if your class has been reading *A Raisin in the Sun*, you could list the major characters on the left side of the sheet and noun phrases that describe each of them on the other—not in the same order, of course. For example, you could have the name *Beneatha Younger* (“Bennie”) on the left side and *an independent young woman* on the right side (see Exhibit 1.3).

Next, you can have your students fill in blanks with their own appositives in sentences that you create. Again, it’s best to embed this activity in content students have been studying in order to boost learning at the same time that you’re developing writing skills.

EXHIBIT 1.3

Match Appositives	
Name: _____	Date: _____
Match each noun with the appositive that best describes it.	
_____ 1. Walter Lee Younger	a. an independent young woman
_____ 2. Lena Younger ("Mama")	b. an ambitious person
_____ 3. Ruth Younger	c. an emotionally strong woman
a. _____ 4. Beneatha Younger ("Bennie")	d. the matriarch of the family
_____ 5. Joseph Asagai	e. a Nigerian student

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Level 1 Example

If your class is studying explorers of the New World, you might give them the following:

Henry Hudson, _____, explored what is now known as the Hudson River.

A student might answer:

Henry Hudson, *an employee of the Dutch East India Company*, explored what is now known as the Hudson River.

Level 2 Example

A more demanding activity is to give students a topic and have them write a sentence about it that includes an appositive. This activity develops students' abilities to paraphrase and summarize material they have read. For example, if you're teaching biology, you could give your students the topic "natural selection." A student response might be:

Natural selection, a process of evolution, results in species with favorable traits.

You can also provide an appositive—such as *a renewable resource*—and ask students to write a sentence that includes it.

Wind energy, a renewable resource, can produce electricity to power a city.

HOW TO DIFFERENTIATE APPOSITIVE ACTIVITIES

There are several ways to differentiate appositive activities for struggling students. One way to make the activity less challenging is to underline the appositives in the sentences you provide for students. For example:

Primary sources, *firsthand accounts of events*, are used to study history.

An even easier alternative would be to give struggling students the same activity you've designed for others but include a list of appositives at the top of the page. Students can then choose appositives from the list and insert them in the appropriate sentences. For example:

- a. a Virginia slave
 - b. a leader in the movement to end slavery
 - c. a conductor on the Underground Railroad
1. Harriet Tubman, _____, was born in 1821 on a plantation in Maryland.
 2. John Brown, _____, met Harriet in 1858.
 3. Nat Turner, _____, led a famous rebellion in 1831.

Put Them Together: Sentence Combining

Practicing sentence-combining activities does the following:

- Effectively teaches grammar and usage
- Encourages students to produce more complex sentences
- Enables students to see various options for crafting sentences
- Exposes students to varied writing structures and enhances syntactic flexibility
- Helps students focus on what is important to include in a sentence
- Improves fluency in writing

Sentence combining involves giving students a series of short declarative sentences and having them find various ways of combining those sentences into one longer, complex sentence. It is one of the most powerful strategies in writing instruction. Extensive research has found it to be the most effective way of teaching grammar. It also gives students greater control over **syntax**, which is the way words and sentences are put together and ordered.¹¹

If you've already taught your students how to use conjunctions, appositives, and subordinating conjunctions, they'll be able to draw on those techniques in finding ways to combine sentences. They'll also be able to practice using **pronouns**.

To introduce students to sentence combining, give them a series of short, declarative sentences that can be combined into one longer, complex sentence. Begin with just two or three sentences, adding more as students' skills develop.

For example, you could give your students the following short sentences:

Nate took the subway every day.

Nate did not like the subway.

Nate needed to get to work.

There are a variety of ways these sentences could be combined into one longer sentence. You could, for example, put the second sentence first and introduce it with a subordinating conjunction. You could also use a conjunction to connect the third sentence to the other two:

Although Nate did not like the subway, he took it every day because he needed to get to work.

There are usually various correct ways to combine sentences. The previous example could also be combined like this:

Nate didn't like the subway, but he took it every day because he needed to get to work.

While students are learning this strategy, it may be helpful to provide them with a cue that will guide their combining, such as "use an appositive" or "use a conjunction." Once they've started to feel comfortable with the concept of sentence combining, it's time to start embedding the activity in the content you're teaching.

Level 1 Example

If you've been teaching your students about two of the ancient civilizations of India, you could give them the following sentences to combine:

Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa were twin cities.

Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa had urban planning.

The cities had a system of plumbing.

One possible response would be as follows:

Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa were twin cities that had urban planning and a system of plumbing.

Level 2 Example

My colleague Betsy Duffy, director of language arts at The Windward School, and I created the following example for a science class studying the periodic table:

The periodic table is a chart of chemical elements.

The chart displays the elements in horizontal rows.

They are displayed horizontally in order of increasing atomic number.

They are displayed vertically in order of the structural similarity of their atoms.

A student might combine these sentences to create this sentence:

The periodic table, a chart of chemical elements, displays elements horizontally in order of increasing atomic number and vertically in order of the structural similarity of their atoms.

A Daily Dose of the Revolution: Using Sentence Activities in the Classroom

Given that the ability to craft a good sentence is the necessary foundation for all good writing, it's important to offer as many opportunities as possible for students to practice writing sentences. Once you and your students have become acquainted with various TWR sentence activities, you'll find there are many ways to use them in your classroom—no matter the grade level or the subject you're teaching.

Here are a few possibilities:

At the beginning of class, you can give students a do-now to review material you've taught previously.

Although Egyptians built the pyramids, _____.

Mid-lesson, you may want to pause and have students do a **stop and jot** by asking them to develop a question about what they've learned so far.

You could also have students turn-and-talk to try to put new vocabulary words in sentences using subordinating conjunctions.

Since / persevere

Even though / mediocre

After / captivate

Be sure to tell them that they can use alternative forms of the given term, for example, *perseverance*, *mediocrity*, *captivated*.

At the end of class, consider having students fill in exit slips responding to highlights in the lesson.

Egyptians built pyramids because _____.

Egyptians built pyramids, but _____.

Egyptians built pyramids, so _____.

On tests and in homework assignments ask students to use the expository terms found in Appendix A (“Expository Writing Terms”) to develop and answer questions about what they are studying. In addition to prompting students to think carefully about content, this activity will help them understand the different meanings of these expository terms when they encounter them on tests or elsewhere. If they’ve used the terms *trace* and *justify* in formulating their own questions, for example, they’re less likely to become confused when they see directions using those terms. Perhaps, for example, you’ve had the experience of asking students to *justify* a series of events on a test, but many students only *traced* them.

You can ask your students to formulate their own test or assignment instructions, using the expository terms, and then respond to them. Depending on the content the class is studying, students might come up with some of the following instructions:

Describe the relationship between Charlotte and Fern.

Trace the events leading up to the Civil War.

Justify the arguments for year-round school.

Enumerate the reasons for following a vegan diet.

If you weave these kinds of sentence-level activities into your instruction on a daily basis, you’ll be giving your students the tools they need to create effective paragraphs and compositions, while at the same time boosting their understanding of the content you’re teaching.

TO SUM UP

- Use sentence activities to teach grammar and conventions.
- When introducing a new activity, begin by modeling it and having students practice it orally.
- Have students practice activities with sentence fragments, scrambled sentences, and run-on sentences to grasp the concept of a complete sentence.
- Familiarize students with the four sentence types—statement, command, question, and exclamation—to equip them to vary their sentence structure and create effective topic and concluding sentences.
- Have students develop questions about texts or pictures to spur them to read closely and deepen their content knowledge.
- Give students sentence-stem activities with *but*, *because*, and *so* to enable them to think critically and to use and understand more complex sentences in their writing and reading.
- Have students practice beginning sentences with subordinating conjunctions (*although*, *since*, etc.) to familiarize them with the syntax used in written language, help them extend their responses, enhance their reading comprehension, and provide a way to create interesting topic sentences.
- Introduce students to appositives to help them create effective topic sentences and give a reader more information.
- Have students practice sentence combining to teach grammar and help them create longer sentences using varied structures.
- Embed sentence activities in the content you're teaching as much as possible to check students' comprehension and deepen their understanding.

Notes

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5. R. Beck, L. Black, L. Krieger, P. Naylor, and D. Shabaka, *World History* (Evanston, IL: McDougal Little, 2005).
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