

What Does Syntax Have to Do with Reading Comprehension?

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Topics

- Review “strands” and processes of comprehension
- Identify challenges of academic language, especially sentence structure
- Explore techniques for building students’ “sentence smarts”

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The Goals of Skilled Reading (Common Core State Standards)

- Read closely to determine what the text says.
- Determine central ideas or themes; summarize.
- Analyze where, when, why, and how...
- Interpret words and phrases
- Analyze the structure of texts (sentences, paragraphs, sections)

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Scarborough's "Rope" Model

LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE
(facts, concepts, etc.)

VOCABULARY
(breadth, precision, links, etc.)

LANGUAGE STRUCTURES
(syntax, semantics, etc.)

VERBAL REASONING
(inference, metaphor, etc.)

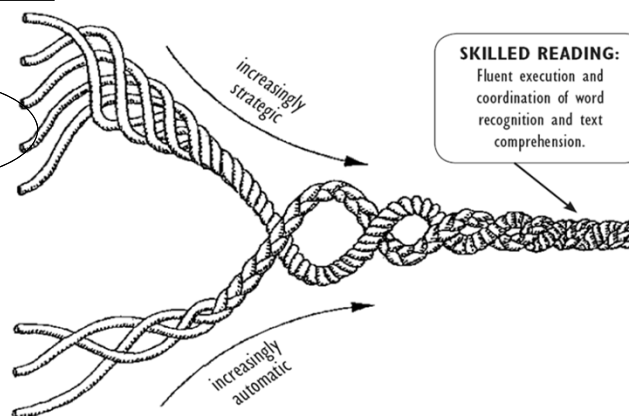
LITERACY KNOWLEDGE
(print concepts, genres, etc.)

WORD RECOGNITION

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS
(syllables, phonemes, etc.)

DECODING (alphabetic principle,
spelling-sound correspondences)

SIGHT RECOGNITION
(of familiar words)



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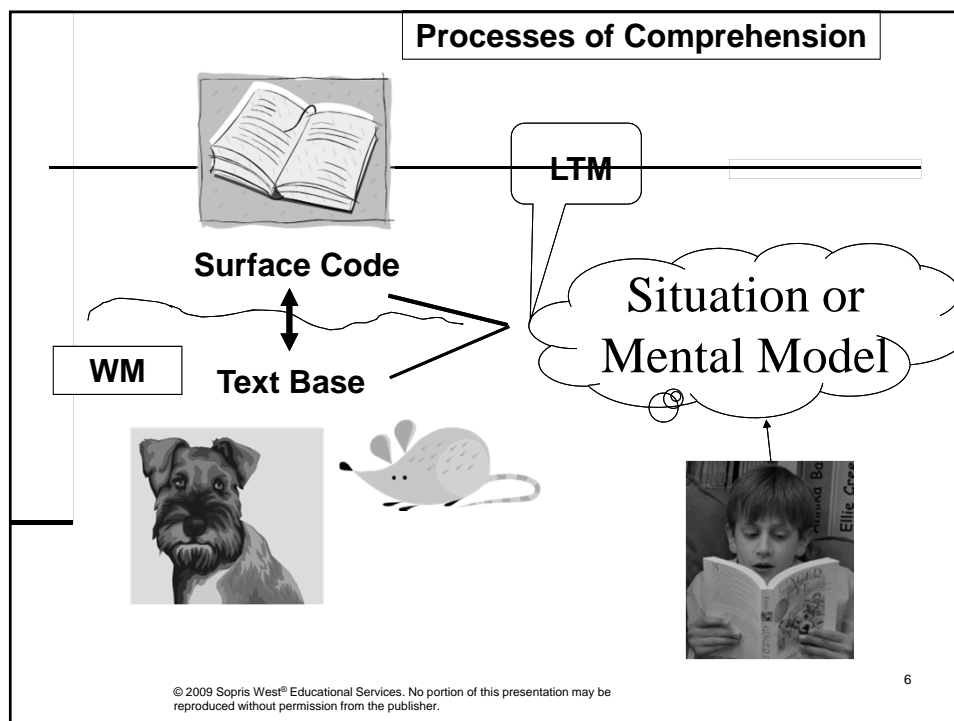
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Why Focus on the Sentence?

- To determine who did what to whom, when and how and why
- To distinguish meanings of words with multiple grammatical forms (*fly, produce*)
- To interpret punctuation and to use punctuation to clarify meaning
- To recognize and resolve ambiguity

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Causes for Poor Comprehension?

■ "... individual differences in comprehension could arise from failures in comprehension processes at the surface code, the text base, or the (mental) situation model, or with the memorial processes that are necessary for integration and revision."

(Barnes et al., 1998)

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Excerpt from *Stuart Little* (E.B.White)

"One day when Stuart had recovered from **bronchitis**, he took his new skates and put on his ski pants and went out to look for an ice pond. He didn't get far. The minute he stepped out into the street he saw an **Irish terrier**, so he had to **shinny** up an iron gate and jump into a garbage can, where he hid in a **grove** of celery."

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Surface Code and the Text Base

Surface Code	Text Base
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Stuart had recovered from bronchitis ■ he took his new skates & put on his ski pants ■ went out to look for an ice pond ■ he didn't get far ■ he saw an Irish terrier ■ so ■ shinny up an iron gate ■ jump into a garbage can ■ he hid in a grove of celery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ serious pulmonary illness ■ eager to play & explore ■ intended to skate outside ■ stopped in his tracks ■ dangerous dog; threat ■ quick get-away ■ (as a result) ■ nearest escape route, yucky! frightening ■ protected by the leaves

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Sentences Do the Work of Text

- *Syntax* is the system of language that specifies how words, phrases, and clauses can be sequenced.
- Syntax must be understood in order to comprehend the surface code and its correspondence with the underlying text base. Ultimately, the mental model is constructed one sentence at a time.

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Building Sentence Sense

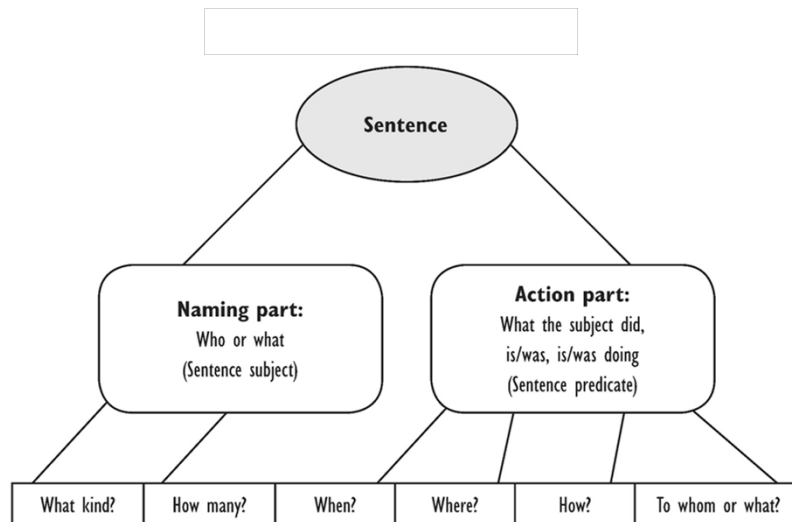
“The sentence itself is a story with a beginning, middle and end. Something happens in a sentence. Without subjects, there are no heroes or villains. Without verbs, there is no action. Without objects, nothing is moved, changed, destroyed or created.”

Linton Weeks, Washington Post, 6/15/08

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Basic English Sentence Structure Diagram



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The Roles Words Play in Sentences

How words express meaning	What questions can be asked
person, place, thing (noun)	what or who
substitutes for a noun (pronoun)	what or who
action word (verb)	how, is doing what
describing word (adjective)	what kind, how many
how an action is done (adverb)	in what way
relationship of a substantive word to a verb, adjective, or noun (preposition)	how, when, where
joins dependent and independent clauses (conjunction)	why, wherefore

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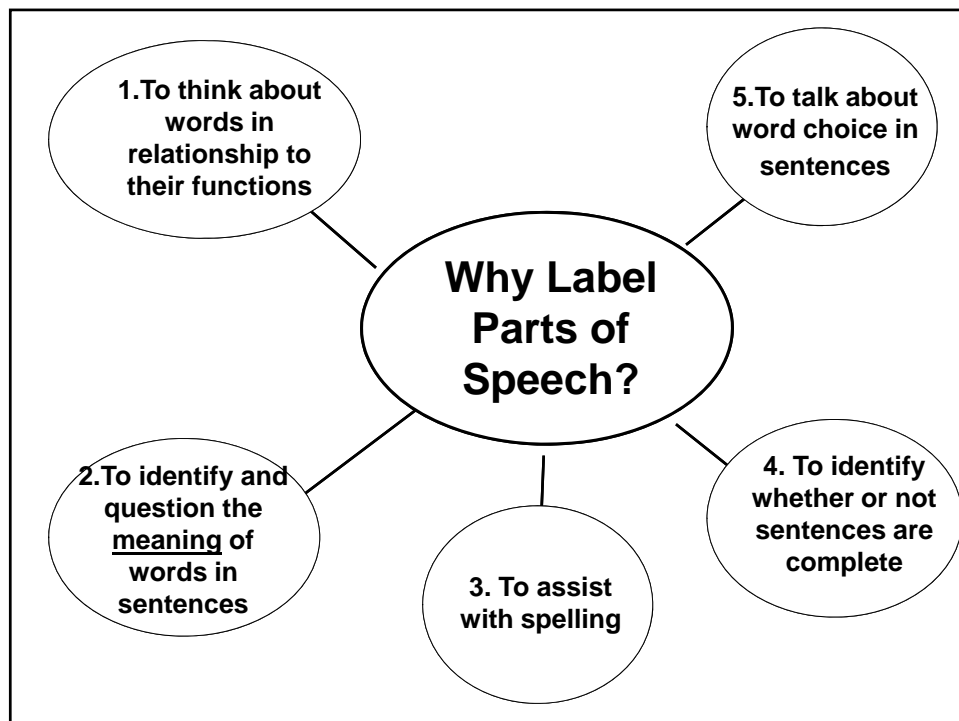
Sentence-Builder Chart

How many? Which ones? What kind of? (adjective)	Who? What? (noun)	Is/was doing, feeling, thinking (verb)	To whom? To what? For whom? With what? (indirect object)	What? (noun phrase) (direct object)	Where? When? How? Why? (preposition or adverbial phrase)
Gray	fog	gives	the city	a quiet feel	during the morning.
Female	wolves	protect		their pups	in the den.

Place the Words in the Sentence Builder Chart

- Manatees eat.
- Manatees eat seagrass.
- Manatees graze in shallow seagrass meadows.
- Slow-moving, docile manatees graze throughout the day.

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Phrase or Clause?

Phrase

A group of words that are part of a sentence and work together.

noun phrase — *the old lady*

verb phrase — *spoke softly*

prepositional phrase — *to her care-giver*

Clause

Dependent:

A group of words that contains a subject and a predicate but does not express a complete thought.

Independent: A group of words that contains a subject and a predicate that does express a complete thought.

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Make a Phrase to Answer the Question

WHEN?

the

in

a

WHERE?

evening

circle

HOW?

moment

quiet

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Sort Your Phrases (from <i>Souder</i>)		
Noun Phrases	Verb Phrases	Prepositional Phrases (prep + noun phrase)
she the door	shut	on the tin-topped table
<p>Now she shut the door and put her basket on the tin-topped table. The creature beds down with the wound against a heap of oak leaves. The leaves make a poultice that draws out the poison and heals the wound with a hard brown scab. The boy could see that her eyes were filled with hurt.</p>		

Phrase or Clause?	
<p><u>Phrase</u></p> <p>A group of words that are part of a sentence and work together.</p> <p>noun phrase — <i>the old lady</i> verb phrase — <i>spoke softly</i> prepositional phrase — <i>to her care-giver</i></p>	<p><u>Clause</u></p> <p>Dependent: A group of words that contains a <u>subject</u> and a <u>predicate</u> but <u>does not</u> express a complete <u>thought</u>.</p> <p>Independent: A group of words that contains a <u>subject</u> and a <u>predicate</u> that <u>does</u> express a complete <u>thought</u>.</p>
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Phrases and Clauses: Examples

Phrases	Dependent Clauses	Independent Clauses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in the air • through the haze • the red car • galloped fast • between two slices of bread • could agree • inside the fire station 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • after the children left the room • unless the boat docks on time • whenever the two meet • if we get there in time • which he knows so much about 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most teenagers have a curfew. • Slowly the balloon descended. • Jim studied for hours. • Meeting the deadline was challenging.

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Sorting Phrases and Clauses

Make 3 columns, then write the words in the appropriate place.

Phrases	Dependent Clauses	Independent Clauses

Sorting Phrases and Clauses

after lunch	underneath the front seat	as we parked in the driveway	beside the couch
when Mark ran into the room	before the principal appeared	throughout the day	whenever it snows
across the amusement park	under the stairs	while you are away	because he had work to do
though I love visiting the museum	if I have time today	between the rows of corn	unless you can be here at nine

Sorting Phrases and Clauses

since she had a relapse	yet there was hesitation	regardless of the time	waiting patiently
next the dancers appeared	however you approach it	so that we are all in agreement	as long as needed
against all odds	by the banks of the river	without any fear	as soon as the sun sets
until the traffic clears	throughout his life	whenever he agrees	in all situations

Phrasing: What Sounds Right?

One day
when Stuart had recovered
from **bronchitis**
he took his new skates
and put on his ski pants
and went out
to look
for an ice pond.

One day when
Stuart had
recovered from
bronchitis he took
his new
skates and put on his
ski pants and went
out to look for
an ice pond.

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Simple Sentence

... **one single, independent clause with a subject and predicate.**

- Examples with single subjects and predicates:
 - The girl loved her lizard.
 - Wolves howl at the moon.
 - Dogs are descended from wolves.

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Simple Sentences

Compound subject	The rich and <u>poor</u> live together.
Compound predicate	Stuart <u>grabbed</u> his skates, <u>strode</u> down to the pond, and <u>glided</u> on the ice.
Compound object	There he found <u>some friends</u> , <u>some relatives</u> , and <u>some other pets</u> .
Elaborated subject	The <u>long, compound, complex sentences</u> demanded her attention.
Elaborated predicate	Stuart strode <u>down the long hall, into the cavernous room, and up to the raised platform</u> .
Appositive	Stuart, <u>a shy character</u> , spoke quietly.

Compound Sentence

Two or more independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction:

for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so (FANBOYS)

- She did not cheat on the test, for it was not the right thing to do.
- I think I will buy the red car, or I will lease the blue one.
- I really want to go to work, but I am too sick to drive.
- I am counting my calories, yet I really want dessert.
- He ran out of money, so he had to stop playing poker.
- They got there early, and they got really good seats.
- There was no ice cream in the freezer, nor did they have money to go to the store.

Subordinating Conjunctions, Complex Sentence

Subordinating conjunctions convey the relationship between the dependent clause(s) and the independent clause.

Causation	Reversal or Contradiction	Time Sequence	Conditionality
because, of, or, in order that, so	but, or, although, however, nevertheless, even though, yet, regardless of	then, now, next, finally, as soon as, before, since, until, whenever, while, when	either–or if–then unless since

Identify the Parts of the Sentence

“The minute he stepped out into the street he saw an **Irish terrier**, **so** he had to **shinny** up an iron gate and jump into a garbage can, where he hid in a **grove** of celery.”

Introductory adverbial clause:

Independent clause:

Coordinating conjunction:

Independent clause:

Adverbial clause:

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Complex Sentences

A dependent clause is attached to an independent clause.

Subordinate clause	<u>When I was home alone</u> , I locked all the doors to the house.
Participial phrase	<u>Knowing that he was right all along</u> , the candidate stuck to his position.
Relative clause (who, that, whose, which)	The residents <u>who welcomed new neighbors</u> were friendly.
Infinitive phrase	<u>To feel as if one cannot keep up</u> produces anxiety.

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Types of Sentences: Review!

Each morning, the farmer releases cows into the field.

That they are likely to get little sleep will make no difference in outcome.

I would like to live in Australia, but my family wants to stay in the US.

Hippos can close their mouths and hold their breath for about ten minutes.

They sink to the bottom and eat the river grasses.

A hippo can still breathe, see, and hear when most of its head is hidden under the water.

What is Challenging about This S?

“Then one of the officers rode up and gave the word for the men to mount, and in a second every man was in his saddle, and every horse stood expecting the touch of the rein, or the pressure of his rider’s heels, all animated, all eager; but still we had been trained so well that, except by the champing of our bits, and the restive tossing of our heads from time to time, it could not be said that we stirred.”

(From Sewell, A. [1955]. *Black Beauty*.
Racine, WI: Western Printing, p.192)

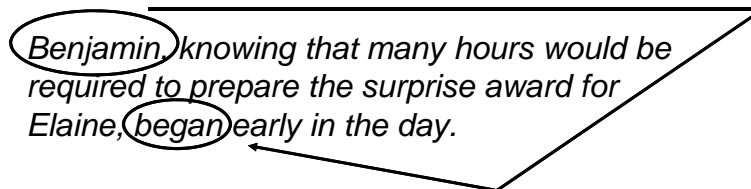
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Difficult Sentence

When the main subject is far from the main verb.

Benjamin, knowing that many hours would be required to prepare the surprise award for Elaine, began early in the day.



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Problematic Sentence Structures

■ **Passive voice**

- The passenger van was hit broadside by logging truck.

■ **Double negative**

- We had no reason to think she was unstable.

■ **Verb tenses and auxiliaries**

- He decided he would not be interfering with the plan.

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Problematic Sentence Structures

■ **Prepositions and articles**

- He put the paper aside to read the book.
- He put the paper beside the book.
- He put the paper inside the book.

■ **Ambiguous phrases, word order, and placement of phrases**

- Folding diapers would be expensive.
- Hanging plants would require light.
- They will understand only this.
- Only they will understand this.
(Exactly who understands what?)

Direct Instruction of Sentence Comprehension

- Phrase marking, reading aloud.
- Identifying words by their function (S Builder)
- Sentence coding (*Framing Your Thoughts*)
- Sentence anagrams, words and phrases
- Classification of sentence types; punctuation.
- Sentence elaboration.
- Sentence deconstruction and paraphrase.
- Sentence combining.

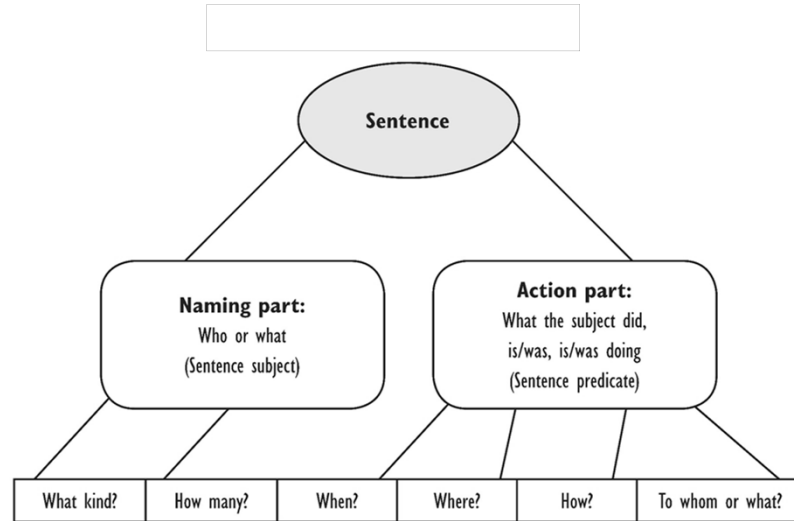
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The Sentence Builder Chart

What Kind?	Who or What	Is/was Doing	Who or What	When? How? Where?	When? How? Where?
	The child	wants	ice cream		
	The child	is dancing			
The charming	toddler	is dancing		to the music	on her tippy toes
Talented	children	perform	plays	in the school's talent show	before a charmed audience

Basic English Sentence Structure Diagram



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Sentence Completion (or Assembly)

Who or What
Subject



Is/Was Doing?
Predicate

- Burt, the giant troll, _____.
- Δ _____ buried the worms.
- The mountain climber, arms outstretched, _____.
- Δ _____ flew over the hayfields.

Marking Subject and Predicate

Example:

The first restaurant served big, rich crab cakes.

(Find the complete subject and underline it once.)

The first restaurant served big, rich crab cakes.

(Box the main subject noun.)

The first restaurant served big, rich crab cakes.

(Find the predicate and underline it twice.)

The first restaurant served big, rich crab cakes.

(Put a wavy line under the main verb.)

The first restaurant served big, rich crab cakes.

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Mark these Sentences

- We enjoyed a leisurely meal by the waterfront dock.

- After we drove home, my husband asked for a fizzy antacid drink.

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Sentence Anagrams

What sentence can you make from these words?

odds win I spite will all of in

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Make An Anagram – Share with a Partner

- Think of a sentence with about 6-8 words.
- Write the sentence in mixed-up order, using sticky notes.
- Give it to your partner to decipher.
- Ask your partner to explain the strategy he/she used to group the words.

Punctuation Matters!

How do these two sentences differ?

- I've finally decided to cheer up, everybody!
- I've finally decided to cheer up everybody!
- or
- Slow, children crossing.
- Slow children crossing.

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Read This

A?
B C D.
E F, G H, I J.
K! L M?
N O P, Q R S.
T, U, V, W; X Y Z.

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Systematic Sentence Elaboration

Elaborate a kernel sentence, step-by-step.

**“Masterpiece Sentences”
technique from *LANGUAGE!*
® and *LANGUAGE!Live***

(Greene, 2000;
Moats, 2014)

- Begin with the kernel subject and predicate.
- Paint the predicate.
- Move clauses.
- Paint the subject.
- Substitute words.
- Polish the sentence.

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Systematic Sentence Elaboration

STEPS

1. **Kernel sentence.**
2. **Paint the predicate.**
3. **Move the predicate painters.**
4. **Paint the subject.**
5. **Substitute words and polish the S.**

EXAMPLES

- The wolf howled.
- The wolf howled with his pack mates at the full moon.
- At the full moon, the wolf howled with his pack mates.
- At the full moon, the magnificent alpha male wolf howled with his pack mates.
- At the height of the full moon, the magnificent alpha male howled joyfully with his pack mates.

Write a Masterpiece Sentence

- Begin with the kernel subject and predicate. "Teachers work."
- Paint the predicate.
- Move clauses.
- Paint the subject.
- Substitute words.
- Polish the sentence.

Sentence Combining

Combine two simple sentences by making a compound subject. Mary played. Her brother played.

Combine two simple sentences by combining the predicates. Jan skipped across the floor. Jan danced, too.

Combine two simple sentences with a conjunction. Don needed a battery for his car. He left the lights on all night.

Combine more than two sentences by embedding a clause and moving words.

The train chugged over the bridge. The train was pulled by an old locomotive engine. The engine was puffing black smoke. It was a suspension bridge.

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Summary: How to Build Sentence Smarts

- Read to children from challenging and well-written texts.
- Encourage expanded sentences in oral language.
- Talk about shared experiences; limit screen time!



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Summary: How to Build Sentence Smarts

- Mark and read phrases.
- Identify functions of words (parts of speech).
- Deconstruct (paraphrase) problem sentences.
- Sort, combine phrases and clauses.
- Build gradually from simple to complex S's; use a sentence writing curriculum.
- Have a daily Sentence Workout!



Why Read?

- “Through books we experience other times, other places, other lives. We manage to become much more than our own selves.”

...Anna Quindlen,
How Reading Changed My Life

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