

The Write Way to Teach Grammar



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What Doesn't Work

Spend the first six weeks of every school year re-introducing parts of speech, phrases, clauses, types of sentences, punctuation, usage.

Have the students to do sequential exercises in the grammar book.

They need to do this because they didn't learn grammar last year (or the year before, or the year before, or the year before.....)

Why It Doesn't Work

Multiple research project over the last 75 years have shown that students do not transfer grammar concepts learned in isolation to their writing.

Students see virtually NO relevance in their daily lives or in their future work lives to the labels attached to grammatical concepts, yet most grammar instruction focuses on the *analysis* of language rather than the *use* of it.

Why They Don't Remember

Students in general do not remember what they learn about grammar from year to year.

The reason this happens is because they have not processed the concepts on the levels demanded by Bloom's Taxonomy. Thus, their processing is temporary and shallow rather than deep and permanent.

They learn grammar only on the "remember" or "knowledge" level but do not progress to "understand," "apply," "analyze," "evaluate," or "synthesize/create."

What *Does* Work

Use grammar as a tool to help students write better.

Show students how to practice sentence modeling using inventive syntax from the novels they are reading in class.

Teach students to embed detail, imagery, and figurative language in their writing by using the various types of phrases.

Have students practice sentence construction techniques that include specific grammatical structures.

Making Cool Sentences

Start with an ordinary sentence that consists of an article, a subject, and a verb.

The wombat wobbled.

Add Adjectives and Adverbs

The *wily* wombat wobbled *weirdly*.



Add Prepositional Phrases

In the wilderness, the wily wombat wobbled weirdly toward the billabong.



Add an Appositive Phrase

In the wilderness, the wily wombat,
*a furry fellow unfortunately named
Poindexter*, wobbled weirdly toward
the billabong.



Add a Subordinate Clause

In the wilderness, the wily wombat, a furry fellow unfortunately named Poindexter, wobbled weirdly toward the billabong *as the monsoon zoomed through the pale Australian sky.*



Add Three Absolute Phrases

In the wilderness, the wily wombat, a furry fellow unfortunately named Poindexter, wobbled weirdly toward the billabong as the monsoon zoomed through the pale Australian sky, *the winds whipping the waves, the rain streaming down upon the parched land like confetti, the light fading into an ominous darkness.*

Could You Pass This Quiz?



My sixth graders can!

Write a simple sentence that includes at least one adjective, one adverb, one prepositional phrase, and one appositive phrase.

Write a compound-complex sentence that starts with a participial phrase.

Write a simple sentence that starts with three absolute phrases.

Write a compound sentence that contains an infinitive phrase. Combine the independent clauses without using a conjunctive adverb or a coordinating conjunction.

Write a compound sentence that begins with two prepositional phrases. Combine the independent clauses using a coordinating conjunction. Punctuate your sentence correctly.

Write a complex sentence that begins with a subordinate clause. Punctuate it correctly.

Write a complex sentence that ends with a subordinate clause. Punctuate it correctly.

Write a compound-complex sentence containing a simile or metaphor.

Why Teach Grammar?

Knowing about clauses and phrases is the only way for a person to know the reasons WHY punctuation works the way it does.

Learning to use the different types of phrases (prepositional, gerund, participial, appositive, infinitive, absolute) helps writers construct sentences filled with detail, imagery, and precision.

Teaching students to manipulate sentence structure creates powerful and able writers.

OK, So How Do You Do That?



Here are a few ways...

Sentence imitation

Writing poetry with phrases

Skeleton stories

Shape sentences

Sentence unscrambling and expansion

Writing Poetry with Phrases

Form A

Absolute phrase,

Absolute phrase,

Absolute phrase,

Independent clause split by an appositive phrase,

Prepositional phrase

Prepositional phrase

Prepositional phrase

Prepositional phrase

Prepositional phrase.

Model

Thin branches reaching raggedly for the sky,
Chunky roots planted deep inside the soil,
Feathery boughs sheltering the tiny woodland creatures,

The ancient pine tree, tall sentinel of the forest, keeps its vigil,

At dawn
In the silvery darkness
Without a word
During the solemn ceremony
Of the sunrise.

Form B

Gerund phrase as the subject
finish the sentence with a rhyme.

Gerund phrase as the subject
finish the sentence with a rhyme.

Gerund phrase as the subject
finish the sentence with a rhyme.

Gerund phrase as the subject
finish the sentence with a rhyme.

Model

Reading a book like *Moby Dick*
takes persistence, tenacity, and a mind that's slick.

Learning to write like Hemingway
will take you more than one school day.

Mastering the art of argument
is a talent that is earned, not lent.

Using the language with talent and flair
will keep you from error and utter despair.

Form C

Independent clause with an appositive phrase in it,

Participial phrase

Participial phrase

Participial phrase

Participial phrase

Participial phrase.

Model

The bats, dark demons of the sunset, swirl and flutter,
squeaking their songs of chaos
gathering in patterns of shadow
blocking the sun's streaking
clustered in nightmare battalions
swooping from their underground lair.

Form D

a subordinate clause,
an independent clause:

an infinitive phrase and a prepositional phrase,
an infinitive phrase and a prepositional phrase,
an infinitive phrase and a prepositional phrase,
an infinitive phrase and a prepositional phrase—

a final independent clause.

Model

Because cats are wise
They know these things are good:

To sleep on a sunny afternoon pillow,
To point their heads and tails toward the sky,
To snuggle on warm laps,
To survey the world from high perches--

These are the wise ways of the feline.

So How Do They Write These ?

How do we help the students use these grammatical structures without teaching grammar in isolation?

- Use the models. The kids will learn the concepts without direct instruction. All they need is reinforcement.
- Use resources like the Comma Cheat Sheet and the Phrase Resource Drawer. Don't restrict the students' use of them. Don't worry—they'll learn the names through constant practice.

Example from the Comma Cheat Sheet

A subordinate clause is a group of words that has both a subject and a verb, but it begins with a subordinating conjunction like “because,” “although,” or “since,” and so it cannot stand alone as a sentence. A subordinate clause at the beginning of a sentence is followed by a comma.

Because Alex is a good writer, he writes vividly about his experiences.

Although Poindexter broke his glasses, he was still able to complete the test.

Although the elephant had lost its tooth, it still ate Albert.

Example from the Phrase Resource Drawer

An absolute phrase is composed of a noun plus an adjective or a participle, plus any modifiers that describe the noun or adjective.

An absolute phrase is really a tool of concision, allowing the writer to embed a full thought into a phrase that is *almost a clause*.

Basically, to make the absolute phrase, the writer just removes a “to be” verb from the clause.

Model

Two independent clauses: “Her expression was dejected. Sarah trudged into the room.”

One of the clauses compressed into an absolute phrase: “*Her expression dejected, Sarah trudged into the room.*”

His face was red with embarrassment. Henry withdrew from the room

His face red with embarrassment, Henry withdrew from the room.

Her eyes were shining with delight. Polly opened the gift.

Polly, her eyes shining with delight, opened the gift.

Extension

One of the best ways to use absolute phrases is in triads, or groups of three. Observe the following examples:

Its tiny wings outstretched, its little voice peeping urgently, its orange feet pattering through the muddy grass, the baby duck ran toward its mother.

Its tiny wings outstretched, its little voice peeping urgently, its orange feet pattering through the muddy grass, the baby duck ran toward its mother.

Here's another way to do it...

The baby duck ran toward its mother, its tiny wings outstretched, its little voice peeping urgently, its orange feet pattering through the muddy grass.

Or, you could do a subject/verb split!

The baby duck, its tiny wings outstretched, its little voice peeping urgently, its orange feet pattering through the muddy grass, ran toward its mother.

WHICH ORDER BEST FITS YOUR WRITERLY PURPOSE? WHAT RHETORICAL EFFECT RESULTS FROM YOUR CHOICES?

Sentence Composing

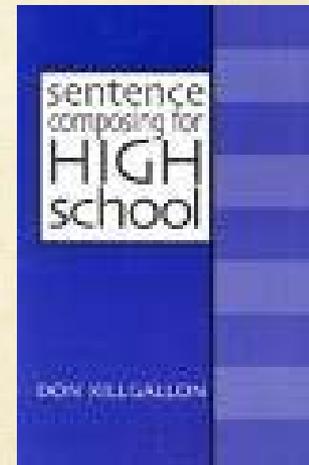
Check out the following books by Don Killgallon, published by Heinemann Press, if you want a great resource to help your students learn to write sentences with terrific style, voice, and structure.

Sentence Composing for Elementary School

Sentence Composing for Middle School

Sentence Composing for High School

Sentence Composing for College



Killgallon's Strategies

Killgallon shows the students how to practice four different sentence composing strategies:

Sentence Unscrambling

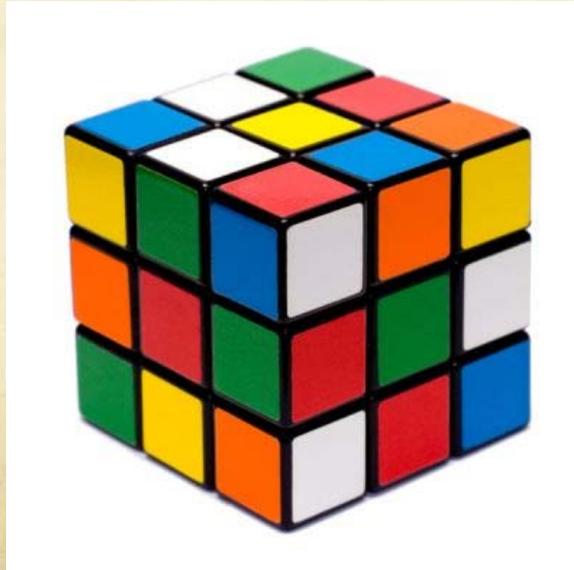
Sentence Combining

Sentence Imitation

Sentence Expanding

Sentence Unscrambling

In these exercises, students unscramble sentences that have been broken into meaningful “chunks.” The purpose of this exercise is to practice putting parts of a sentence into a logical sequence.



Example of Sentence Unscrambling

he knew

But even as that thought touched

his mind

nor any hope of such

that for him

that had bred him

only the shadow

to drift home

and none of the substance

rootless

and without any stake in the

country

would be

Original Sentence

(from *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Rosemary Sutcliffe)

“But even as that thought touched his mind, he knew that for him to drift home, rootless, and without any stake in the country that had bred him, nor any hope of such, would be only the shadow and none of the substance of home-coming.”

Sentence Combining

Combine all of the following sentences into one, using phrases and subordinate clauses to provide details.

He heard the bees.

The bees were zooming along the bell-heather.

The heather was in the clearing.

He smelled the scents of the birch-woods.

The birch-woods were sun-baked.

The scents were warm and aromatic.

The scent of the birch-wood was overlaying the cold saltiness of the sea.

He singled out one among the wheeling gulls.

He watched the gull until it became lost in a flickering cloud of suntouched wings.

The Original Sentence

(from *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Rosemary Sutcliffe):

“He heard the bees zooming among the bell-heather of the clearing, smelled the warm, aromatic scents of the sun-baked birch-woods overlaying the cold saltiness of the sea; singled out one among the wheeling gulls and watched it until it became lost in a flickering cloud of sun-touched wings.”

Sentence Imitation

Original sentence (from *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Rosemary Sutcliffe):

“Silence fell between the three, while the daylight grew around them, and the dogs snarled and tussled over their lump of meat.”

Example of a sentence imitation:

Tension grew within the group, as the sunset blazed above them, and the mosquitoes hissed and whined in their swampy beds.

Sentence Expanding

Original sentence (from *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Rosemary Sutcliffe):

The black mass of the barrow rose above them, *its crest of thorn-trees upreared against the veiled stars.*

Example of imitative sentence expanding:

The tall trunk of the tree stood in front of him, (insert an absolute phrase with nine words in it).

Student sentence:

The tall trunk of the tree stood in front of him, its crown of green leaves silhouetted upon the autumn sky.

Skeleton Story/Essay

One rainy day in June, John Walker was walking down the street when he saw a stray dog sitting under a tree looking miserable. John felt sorry for the dog, so he went over to it and petted it and spoke to it. As he set off for home, the dog followed him. Though John tried to get it to go away, the dog insisted on following him all the way to his home. When he got home, John went into the house and tried to forget the dog, but its whining and barking were impossible to ignore. John finally went out to the dog and dried it off and brought it inside the house. He gave the dog some food and started a fire in the fireplace. John sat down beside the fireplace with a cup of coffee and a book. The dog came over and sat beside him. Because he had been lonely for a long time, John felt contented and happy that the dog had come to live with him. “Welcome home, old fellow,” he said with a smile.

Filling in the Details

Add the following elements to the skeleton story:

- A triad of absolute phrases in at least one sentence
- an additional prepositional phrase in each sentence
- an appositive phrase in two sentences
- an infinitive phrase
- a gerund phrase
- two participial phrases
- a metaphor or simile
- an adjective to each sentence

Examine each verb. If a more precise verb is available, use it, and add an adverb

One rainy, grey day in June, John Walker, *a man without hope*, was limping drearily down the street *toward the bank* when he *spied* a stray dog with a sad face slouching under a tree looking miserable, *its tail drooping wetly, its fur bedraggled, its ribs silhouetted against its soggy fur*. Shivering in his thin raincoat, John pitied the *drenched animal despite its appearance*, so he *approached* it warily and petted it and spoke to it *in a kind voice*. As he set off for home *in the chilly downpour*, the *gaunt* dog followed him. Though John tried to get it to go away, the dog insisted on *tagging along* all the way to his home *in a dark, poverty-stricken part of London*. When he got home, John went into the house, *a tiny cottage with a thatched roof*, and tried to forget the dog *outside his poor dwelling*, but its *insistent* whining and barking were impossible to ignore. But *ignoring the suffering of animals* was not something that *kindly* John could do. *To soothe his conscience*, John finally went out to the dog and dried it off *with a warm blanket* and brought it inside the *small* house. He *offered* the dog some *left-over hamburger in a cracked bowl* and lit a *toasty fire* in the fireplace. *Listening to the dog's quiet sounds of contentment*, John *hunkered* down beside the fireplace *in the corner of the small room* with a cup of *hot coffee* and a book. The dog came over and sat beside him *in the dim firelight*. Because he had been lonely for a long time *after his wife had died*, John felt contented and happy that the *abandoned* dog had come to live with him. "Welcome home, old fellow," he said with a *bittersweet* smile that flickered over his face *like a fleeting shadow*.

Other Strategies

In your handout, you will find lots of other strategies for helping students learn to write better by using grammatical elements as their tools.

Harry Noden's *Image Grammar* Image Palettes

Cumulative (Loose) and Periodic Sentences

Sentence Imitation Exercises

Phrase Practice

Complex Sentence Practice

Style Analysis exercises