

Syntactic Awareness: Teaching Sentence Structure

Excerpts from *Keys to Beginning Reading, Module 7* professional development program.
by Joan Sedita

The Connection Between Sentences and Comprehension

The ability to understand at the sentence level is in many ways the foundation for being able to comprehend text. The ways in which authors express their ideas through sentences (i.e., the syntax they use) greatly affects a reader's ability to access and identify those ideas. Sentences that are complex, contain a large number of ideas (also called *propositions*), or have unusual word order will make it difficult for students to comprehend what they are reading, especially students who enter school with limited oral language exposure or for whom English is second language.

- One by one, sentences (oral or written) communicate ideas that add up to make meaning.
- Efficient processing of sentence structure is necessary for overall comprehension.
- The level of a text's syntax is one predictor of a text's comprehensibility. (Snow et al., 2005)
- Effective readers have knowledge of phrase structures, parts of sentences, and how they work. (Scott, 2004)

Sentence knowledge is also important for student composing (oral or written). As Saddler (2012) explains, "Of the many difficulties writers encounter when engaged in the complex act of writing, crafting sentences that accurately convey the intended meaning is particularly challenging... manipulating sentences is both effortful and critical."

Syntactic Awareness

Syntax is the study and understanding of grammar – the system and arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses that make up a sentence. In order to comprehend a sentence, the reader must process, store (in working memory), and integrate a variety of syntactic and word meaning information (Paris & Hamilton, 2009).

Syntactic Awareness means having the ability to monitor the relationships among the words in a sentence in order to understand while reading or composing orally or in writing. Students build syntactic awareness through exposure to oral language when they are young and particularly through exposure to written language that they hear through read aloud or independent reading (around grade 3).

Activities to Develop Syntactic Awareness

The following three instructional activities help students develop "sentence sense" (i.e., syntactic awareness) by providing opportunities for students to manipulate and add words in sentences.

1. Sentence Anagrams

An anagram is a form of word play in which letters of a word or phrase are rearranged in such a way that a new word or phrase is formed. For example, *cinema* from *iceman*, or *angel* from *glean*. The sentence scramble activity is like an anagram, except that words are rearranged instead of letters.

Students are given a set of words from a sentence that are out of order. They must then rearrange the words into a complete sentence that follows correct English grammar. Words cannot be deleted. Here are two examples:

night wait the until hatchlings
The hatchlings wait until night.

long a flippers turtle her flaps front
A turtle flaps her long front flippers.

Here are a few suggestions for using sentence scrambles with your students:

- Use sentences from text used for reading or read aloud.
- Include words recently encountered in phonics or spelling lessons.
- Include newly learned vocabulary terms.
- Use sentences related to everyday classroom experiences, such as the morning message.
- Introduce sentence scrambles that have just a few words – three or four at the most. Then gradually expand the number of words as well as the complexity of the sentence structure. Be sure to avoid using too many words that might overwhelm students.
- Scaffold the task by capitalizing the first word of the sentence and including punctuation after the last word.

2. Sentence Elaboration

Sentence elaboration activities help students use and manipulate a growing number of words in sentences. They are especially useful for developing syntactic awareness for subordinate clauses, prepositional phrases, and adverbial phrases.

Basic Elaboration: The “W” Questions

Adapted from Marilyn Adams, 2011

For this activity, teachers use six question words: *who*, *what*, *where*, *why*, *which*, *how*. The activity starts with a simple subject (e.g., *the turtle*). Then, a series of questions are asked to prompt students to expand and elaborate. This activity can be done in whole group with students making suggestions while the teacher writes the sentences. For older students, this activity can be done in small groups or with partners. Scaffold by giving students just two or three “W” words, then gradually expand the task.

Examples:

Who?

The turtle

What about her?

The young turtle swam.

Where did she swim?

The young turtle swam in the ocean.

What color was she?

The young, green turtle swam in the ocean.

Why did she swim in the ocean?

The young, green turtle swam in the ocean in search of food.

When?

Every day, the young, green turtle swam in the ocean in search of food.

More Advanced Elaboration: Expanding Kernel Sentences

The Common Core Language Standards (#1a) indicate that by grade 3 students should be able to explain the functions of the major parts of speech. This activity is similar to the one above, but it is more challenging and provides the opportunity to label parts of speech and use grammatical terms.

Use a “popcorn” metaphor to explain this activity to students: a single *kernel* of corn is very small, but when heat energy is added, it *blows up* and becomes larger. In this activity, students start with the base of a kernel sentence (a noun and verb). When they put energy into adding information to the kernel sentence, it also blows up!

Here are some teaching tips:

- You do not have to follow all of the steps when you expand a kernel sentence – you can choose just a few.
- This activity can be done orally for younger children who are not ready to read and write the words.

- Students in grades K through 2 will need the teacher's help to expand a sentence, but by grade 3 some students will be able to complete the activity on their own or with a partner.
- Provide word lists of adverbs, nouns, verbs, and adjectives as a scaffold.
- Give students the six basic coordinating conjunctions that can be used to generate a compound sentence: *for, and, nor, but, yet, so*.

Here are the steps for expanding a kernel sentence, followed by an example.

Basic simple sentence: Noun and verb

- Elaborate the subject - Add articles, adjectives
 - e.g. color, size, shape, number
- Elaborate the predicate - Add adverbs
 - words that end in -ly
- Add phrases (where, why, how, when)
 - Time of day, weather, location

Next Steps (more advanced):

- Compound the subject
- Compound the predicate
- Add a dependent clause to make a complex sentence
- Combine two sentences into a compound sentence

Adapted from: Jennings & Haynes, 2002

EXAMPLE

Kernel Sentence.

turtle dives

Elaborate the subject: articles, adjectives.

The small, green turtle dives.

Elaborate the predicate: adverbs

The small, green turtle dives quickly.

Add a phrase.

The small, green turtle dives quickly into the seaweed.

Compound the subject.

The small, green turtle and his friend dive quickly into the seaweed.

Compound the predicate.

The small, green turtle and his friend dive and swim quickly into the seaweed.

Add a dependent clause to make a complex sentence.

Because he is frightened, the small, green turtle and his friend dive quickly into the seaweed.

Combine two sentences to make a compound sentence.

Because he is frightened, the small, green turtle and his friend dive quickly into the seaweed and hide from predators.

3. Sentence Combining

Developed in the 1960's (Strong, 1986), sentence combining is an effective method for helping students of all ages – in elementary grades through college – develop syntactic awareness to support comprehension and writing of sentences (Graham & Perin, 2007; Saddler, 2012). Sentence combining provides important practice with manipulating and rearranging words in sentences, expanding sentences, and clarifying sentence meaning. Given a set of simple sentences, sentence combining activities require students to apply syntactic knowledge to combine the sentences into a more complex, grammatically correct sentence.

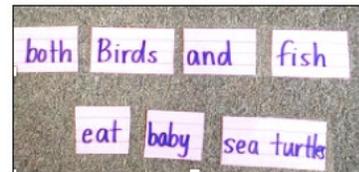
When you use sentence combining with young students in primary grades, it is important to use developmentally appropriate sentence-combining tasks. Consider these teaching tips:

- Start with combining just two, very simple sentences, then add more sentences gradually.
- This activity can be done orally for younger children who are not ready to read and write all the words.
- Some students in grades kindergarten through grade 2 will need the teacher's help to combine sentences, but by grade 3 most students should be able to complete these activities on their own or with a partner.
- Encourage students to explain the reasons for their combining decisions. This will provide an opportunity for them to articulate how they are thinking about word order and sentence construction.
- Sentence combining works best if it is done at least 2 or 3 times a week.

two
sentences



combined
into one



Also, use sample sentences from classroom text as the basis for developing a sentence combining activity. You can do this by finding a complex sentence in the text you are using and breaking it apart into smaller sentences for the students to combine. See the examples below from the read aloud book *One Tiny Turtle* by Nicola Davies (2001).

Birds eat baby sea turtles.

Fish eat baby sea turtles.

The turtle snaps her beak on tiny crabs.

The turtle snaps her beak on shrimps.

Turtles have shells that cover their backs.

Their shells cover their stomachs.

Turtles have shells.

The shells are made from bony plates.

The shells get bigger as turtles grow.

You can use cards with one word per card so students can more easily manipulate the words as they combine the sentences. View the example.

References:

Adams, M.J. (2011). *Reading, language, and the mind*. PowerPoint delivered at NYSED Network Team Institute, November 29, 2011, Albany, NY.

Graham, S. & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve the writing of adolescents in middle and high schools – A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York*: Washington D.C: Alliance for Excellent Education.

Saddler, B. (2012). *Teacher's guide to effective sentence writing*. New York: Guilford Press.

Scott, C. (2004). Syntactic contributions to literacy development. In C. Stone, E. Stillman, B. Ehren, & K. Apel (Eds.) *Handbook of language and literacy* pp 340-363. New York: Guilford Press.

Snow, C., Griffin, P., & Burns, M.S. (eds.). (2005). *Knowledge to Support the Teaching of Reading*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Strong, W. (1986). *Creative approaches to sentence combining*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills. National Council of Teachers of English.

Source: Sedita, J. (2019). Keys to Beginning Reading (professional development program). Rowley, MA: Keys to Literacy. www.keystoliteracy.com Reprinted with permission.