

# Sentence Combining: Teaching Rules of Sentence Structure by Doing

Students with poor writing skills often write sentences that lack 'syntactic maturity' (Robinson & Howell, 2008). That is, these writers' sentences often follow a simple, stereotyped format. In public schools, grammar skills have traditionally been taught in isolation to give students the advanced writing knowledge required to master a diverse range of sentence structures. However, isolated grammar instruction appears to have little or no positive impact in helping poor writers become better writers (Graham & Perin, 2007). A promising alternative is to use sentence combining (Graham & Perin, 2007; Strong, 1986). In this approach, students are presented with kernel sentences and given explicit instruction in how to weld these kernel sentences into more diverse sentence types either by using connecting words to combine multiple sentences into one or by isolating key information from an otherwise superfluous sentence and embedding that important information into the base sentence.

In a simple demonstration of sentence combining, a student may generate these two sentences in her composition on the American Revolution: *The American army had few supplies in the winter of 1776. The American army had few trained military leaders.*

The instructor might meet with the student and have the student recopy the two sentences in this format:

The American army had few supplies in the winter of 1776.

The American army had few trained military leaders. (*and*)

The student would be encouraged to combine the two shorter sentences into a more comprehensive sentence by using the connecting word (coordinating conjunction) 'and' to combine objects: *The American army had few supplies and few trained military leaders in the winter of 1776.*

## Formatting Sentence Combining Examples

These simple formatting conventions are used in sentence-combining exercises (Saddler, 2005; Strong, 1986):

In each example, the base clause (sentence) appears first. Any sentence(s) to be combined or embedded with the base clause appear below that base clause.

- Example: **Base clause:** The dog ran after the bus.

**Sentence to be embedded:** The dog is yellow.

**Student-generated solution:** *The yellow dog ran after the bus.*

*Connecting words* to be used as a sentence-combining tool appear in parentheses at the end of a sentence that is to be combined with the base clause.

- Example: **Base clause:** The car stalled.

**Sentence to be combined:** The car ran out of gas. (*because*)

**Student-generated solution:** *The car stalled because it ran out of gas.*

The element(s) of any sentence to be embedded in the base clause are underlined.

- Example: **Base clause:** The economic forecast resulted in strong stock market gains.

**Sentence to be embedded:** The economic forecast was upbeat.

**Student-generated solution:** *The upbeat economic forecast resulted in strong stock market gains.*

## Using Sentence Combining in Instruction

Teachers who use sentence combining in their writing instruction should follow a direct-instruction approach (Saddler, 2005). The instructor fosters a learning atmosphere that encourages students to take risks when participating in sentence-combining activities. When first introducing sentence-combining to the class, the instructor explains that using varied sentence structures helps writers to better convey meaning. The instructor tells students that there are often multiple correct ways to combine sentences. The instructor completes several sentence-combining examples in front of the group, using a think-aloud approach to show his or her thinking process in successfully combining sentences. Students should then complete sentence-combining examples in pairs or

groups, with the instructor circulating through the class to check for student understanding. Eventually, students work independently on sentence combining tasks to demonstrate mastery. They may then be asked to look in their own writing for examples in which they could combine sentences to improve

A listing of types and examples of sentence-combining appears below in Table 1. When creating lessons on sentence combining, instructors should review the potential types of sentence-combining in Table 1 and decide the order in which those types might be presented to their class.

Table 1: Sentence-combining types and examples (Saddler, 2005; Strong, 1986)	
Type of Sentence	Sentence Combining Example
<p><b>Multiple (Compound) Sentence Subjects or Objects:</b></p> <p>Two or more subjects can be combined with a conjunction (e.g., <i>or</i>, <i>and</i>).</p> <p>Two or more direct or indirect objects can be combined with a conjunction (e.g., <i>or</i>, <i>and</i>).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Skyscrapers in the city were damaged in the hurricane. <u>Bridges</u> in the city were damaged in the hurricane. <i>Skyscrapers and bridges in the city were damaged in the hurricane.</i></li> <li>When they travel, migratory birds need safe habitat. When they travel, migratory birds need <u>regular supplies of food</u>. <i>When they travel, migratory birds need safe habitat and regular supplies of food.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Adjectives &amp; Adverbs:</b> When a sentence simply contains an adjective or adverb that modifies the noun or verb of another sentence, the adjective or adverb from the first sentence can be embedded in the related sentence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dry regions are at risk for chronic water shortages. <u>Overpopulated</u> regions are at risk for chronic water shortages. <i>Dry and overpopulated regions are at risk for chronic water shortages.</i></li> <li>Health care costs have risen nationwide. Those health care costs have risen <u>quickly</u>. <i>Health care costs have risen quickly nationwide.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Connecting Words:</b> One or more sentences are combined with connecting words.</p> <p>Coordinating conjunctions (e.g., <i>and</i>, <i>but</i>) link sentences on an equal basis.</p> <p>Subordinating conjunctions (e.g., <i>after</i>, <i>until</i>, <i>unless</i>, <i>before</i>, <i>while</i>, <i>because</i>) link sentences with one of the sentences subordinate or dependent on the other.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The house was falling apart. No one seemed to care. (but) <i>The house was falling apart, but no one seemed to care.</i></li> <li>The glaciers began to melt. The earth's average temperature increased. (because) <i>The glaciers began to melt because the earth's average temperature increased.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Relative Clauses:</b> Sentence contains an embedded, subordinate clause that modifies a noun.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The artist was the most popular in the city.</li> <li>The artist painted watercolors of sunsets. (who) <i>The artist who painted watercolors of sunsets was the most popular in the city.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Appositives:</b> Sentence contains two noun phrases that refer to the same object. When two sentences refer to the same noun, one sentence be reduced to an appositive and embedded in the other sentence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The explorer paddled the kayak across the raging river.</li> <li>The explorer was <u>an expert in handling boats</u>. <i>The explorer, an expert in handling boats, paddled the kayak across the raging river.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Possessive Nouns:</b> A sentence that describes possession or ownership can be reduced to a possessive noun and embedded in another sentence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some historians view the Louisiana Purchase as the most important expansion of United States territory.</li> <li>The Louisiana Purchase was <u>President Jefferson's</u> achievement. <i>Some historians view President Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase as the most important expansion of United States territory.</i></li> </ul>