



Literacy Connects

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Sentence Combining—an authentic way to teach grammar

Sentence combining--a method for combining short, choppy sentences into longer, more effective ones--is typically used to teach only sentence fluency. Recent studies, however, have shown that sentence combining is also an effective way to teach punctuation, parts of speech, clauses and phrases. The most recent *Writing Next* report recommends sentence combining as a way to teach grammar: "...sentence combining provide(s) an effective alternative to traditional grammar instruction, as this approach improves students' writing quality while at the same time enhancing syntactic skills" (2007, Carnegie Corp. of New York; www.all4ed.org).

Sentence combining can be used to teach any grammar or convention skill. It is best to start with simple skills, like adding adjectives, then build up to the more the complex skills. Start by modeling for the class how to combine sentences, explaining the concept being taught and how it enhances the sentence. Then have students practice combining teacher generated sentences. Sentences will vary, so have students share and discuss their work. Finally, students should be taught to identify and combine sentences in their own writing. Following are a few ways to use sentence combining exercises to teach sentence development, compound and complex sentences, parts of speech, clauses and phrases, and punctuation. See www.drwhimbey.com or <http://WritingFix.org> for more sentence combining activities.

1. **Sentence development**—adding adjectives and adverbs—Using sets of short, related sentences, show students how to combine them into a single clear sentence. Omit words that are needlessly repeated but avoid leaving out important details, for example:

Willie had a beard and moustache.

The beard was bushy.

The beard was long.

The moustache was droopy.

EX. Willie had a long, bushy beard and a droopy moustache.

The man handed me a picture of a woman

He did this silently.

The man was old.

The woman was beautiful.

EX. Silently, the old man handed me a picture of a beautiful woman.

2. **Compound and complex sentences**—have students combine sets of sentences using coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, or so) and/or subordination (whenever, when, after, although, until, while, because, before, if, since, unless) to create a single compound or complex sentence.

Teach conventions by having students replace the conjunction with a semi-colon:

Bill looked at the menu.

He realized how hungry he was.

EX. Bill looked at the menu, and he realized how hungry he was. (Compound sentence)

EX. When Bill looked at the menu, he realized how hungry he was. (Complex sentence)

3. **Prepositional phrases**—have students combine each set of sentences into one clear sentence containing at least one prepositional phrase:

A mouse darted.

It darted across the salad bar.

This happened during lunch.

EX. During lunch, a mouse darted across the salad bar.

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