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Sentence-Combining in Grade Eight

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Sentence-combining is a process which all writers and other users of language employ either intuitively or upon review and revision. We join sentences unconsciously in both oral and written language. Kellogg Hunt writes that “sentence-combining takes one sentence of a certain sort and another of a certain sort and combines them to produce one new sentence. The process of combining little sentences into bigger ones can be repeated an indefinite number of times so that two, three, four, five, and even twenty can be combined into one complicated sentence.”¹ The joining of sentences partially indicates linguistic maturity. A student moves from the simple: “I saw Spot. Spot was running,” to the more complex: “I saw Spot running.” Sentence-combining practice produces students who write longer sentences, and thus express their linguistic maturity.

In “Teaching Syntactic Maturity,” Hunt reports: “John Mellon conducted the first major experiment in teaching sentence-combining; his subjects were about 250 seventh graders. He divided his subjects into three groups. Two groups were control groups, one that proceeded without grammar instruction for the academic year; another, students who learned traditional parsing of the surface structure. The third group received the experimental treatment which consisted of teaching a skeletal grammar focused on those terms needed to explain in only semi-formal ways some of the more frequent sentence combining transformations. As the grammar lessons progressed, students were given sets of sentences with instructions telling which transformations to use combining them.”²

The control groups showed no significant difference, but the experimental group “showed two to three times as much gain in one year as either of the two control groups.”³ The length of the T-unit, an independent clause, was the major evaluative measure.

Other experiments have been conducted. Barbara Miller and James Ney, through oral activities with fourth grade students, show that “a facility in combining sentences can be taught as early as the middle elementary school.”⁴

Many of the textbooks written for college students are now employing sentence-combining activities along with traditional grammar exercises. There is a demonstrated need for alternatives to traditional grammar instruction. W.S. Palmer writes: “Several different reasons have been advanced for the teaching of traditional grammar, among them the notion that it is good for mental discipline and that a knowledge of it automatically improves a student’s ability to write. Research, however, does not support these assumptions.” As early as 1902, J.M. Rice determined that many students who had a sound understanding of English grammar produced

compositions of inferior quality. In research conducted in 1917, Julius Borass ascertained that a higher correlation exists between grammar and arithmetic than grammar and composition. Nora Robinson tested a group of 145 students from four urban schools in 1960 on parts of speech, general ability, and sentence analysis. The students were then asked to write three essays. The coefficients of correlation between grammar tests and composition; grades were extremely low. ⁵ Research on the teaching of traditional grammar indicates that students show no appreciable increase in writing facility as a result.

The students I teach in the seventh and eighth grade have been taught repeatedly the definition of the parts of speech. Most of them can recite these definitions from memory. The problems arise when actual writing occurs; there is little apparent transference of grammar instruction to the written sentence.

One reason for this failure may be that students' oral language skills are more sophisticated than the grammar the middle school English teacher presents. It must be anticlimactic to speak in complex sentences all day and be instructed for six weeks in the parts of speech as they apply to simple sentences.

Students may also be turned off by traditional grammar instruction. Each year the language instruction begins at the same place—and proceeds through much that the student has already heard. How many deaf ears are turned to English teachers when a noun is mentioned? "Oh! Here we go again." By the seventh grade, the immediacy of grammar instruction has been demolished. "Why should I pay attention, attempt to employ this knowledge," the student may rightly ask, "when I know that next year we are going to do the same thing." Students become immune to traditional instruction. James Squire in "Five Rules for Sequence" writes

The exploding world of early adolescence, characterized by the discovery of new ideas, almost inevitably leads to problems in expression....During these years, teachers might best plan a sequence of composition that nourishes and encourages the expansion of ideas, rather than one so demanding that it restricts the fluency of student thinking. ⁶

In late middle school and high school, students need a more packed language to express the complicated ideas that are to be discussed in literature and to express their feelings in general. Ideas become contingent upon one another, inter-related. Eileen J. McGuire notes that "a grammar geared to the development of the student's ability to write good sentences is especially useful at this time, helping him to sort out the onrush of new ideas and at the same time to express his own ideas with some coherence." ⁷ To this end, the sentence-combining curriculum which follows is presented.

While I have never used sentence-combining in class other than in forming compound sentences, I'm looking forward to using it because the students, as well as I, will welcome the change. In sentence-combining, abstract labels are employed minimally and can be dispensed with in the actual practice. Models are employed which enable students to move at their own rates—and further lessen the need for the teacher to serve as final arbiter of right and wrong. The program builds upon intuitive knowledge that the student already possesses. Sentence-combining is easier than traditional grammar for students to work with because they link already-presented sentences. To recognize an adjectival subordinate clause is, of course, more taxing than working with joining already-presented material. In addition, sentence-combining provides clues to indicate the correct embeddings. (Embedding is a sentence-combining term that will appear quite frequently in the literature; it indicates that portion of the sentence which will become a part of another in the final form.) Also, since the words are already there correctly spelled, the student need only be concerned with punctuation. Removing some of the frustration will, we hope engender a renewed desire to punctuate sentences correctly, to get everything correct.

The sentence-combining program, prepared in advance, offers a not insignificant advantage over traditional grammar instruction in that the student can begin the program at any point that does not frustrate him. The program can last a quarter, a semester, or a year, depending on the school calendar and the rate of your students' progress.

Sentence-combining represents a boon to all teachers of English because it does not assume any prior knowledge of grammar. It can be used in conjunction with any language course; it can also supplement a traditional program of language instruction. Students will benefit, and they will enjoy themselves. William Strong in "Sentence-Combining: Back to Basics and Beyond" cites research done by Frank O'Hare: "The experimental group really liked the sentence-combining problems because of the intellectual challenges they presented. O'Hare's sentence-combining practice apparently transferred to real writing, so that at the end of eight months the experimental group was writing composition of a significantly better quality than the control group—quality that went beyond mere technical correctness." ⁸

There are a variety of types of sentence-combining problems offered in journals and the emerging textbooks, but usually they fall into two general formats: open and signaled. In the open sequences Strong presents, several solutions are possible; no one right answer exists. The following exercise is from Strong's *Sentence-Combining: A Composing Book* :

1. The patties are grayish pink.
2. They are grainy like oatmeal.
3. They have already been laid out.
4. They are on the griddle.
5. The griddle is black.
6. The griddle is old.
7. They begin to sizzle in a puddle.
8. The puddle is greasy. ⁹

These exercises encourage flexibility.

The exercises of Mellon, O'Hare, and Cooper provide more direction and include grammatical nomenclature which is essentially optional. I will include it in my program because I feel more comfortable with the old terms, even though the students will not see the terms in the exercises. Having been taught using terms such as participial phrase and infinitives, these terms have meaning to me that they do not have for my students. Seeing the terms helps me to generate additional examples or to find like examples in traditional grammar books. The students need not see these labels because they will not help them with the exercises. Charles Cooper offers the following exercises in his "An Outline for Writing Sentence-Combining Problems:"

The canary flew out of the window.

The canary was *yellow* .

*The yellow canary flew out of the window.

He was a student.

The student was *serious* .

*He was a serious student. ¹⁰

The underlining indicates with which elements the student should be concerned. I prefer the signaled method for these reasons: First, it can be used with grammatical names if the student or the school board wants them; second, the signaled choice leads to one correct answer; my students always seem to want one right answer. Third, the signaled method gives more support to the students because they know which item(s) in the sentence must be changed—and when they just add or delete items.

The sequence of sentence-combining problems that follows has been mapped by Charles Cooper in his “Outline for Sentence-Combining Problems.” Most of the major transformations that students should be familiar with are covered. The examples below are mine: they are easily generated, and the classroom teacher should endeavor to create examples which apply to his or her class, to personalize them.

One word of caution: sentence-combining is not an end in itself; rather it is a method to reach an end. No one class period should be devoted to it. William Strong maintains, and I agree, that “it can be a part of a well-articulated program, but common sense suggests that it can’t be the one and only instructional strategy. It would destroy the basic rationale and usefulness of the approach just as much as using the exercises for grammatical diagramming.” ¹¹ The problems are presented to help students write better—to express complicated ideas well in a larger writing arena, which the teacher must provide.

The instructor should come to using sentence-combining after having established a writing program. The program that I use involves reading literature and writing reactions and summaries. In my class, we also generate lots of creative writing: short stories, poems and one act plays. Each English teacher employs different methods to improve student facility in these areas—and sentence-combining can be integrated into any program.

As an example, in the literature that my students read are many fine sentences that they can appreciate. One method of integrating sentence-combining would be to have students take one sentence that they liked and break it into its kernel or component parts. Then they could exchange these parts with classmates and have them combine them, comparing results with the original.

Creative writing offers a particularly useful backdrop for sentence-combining activities. Students can find dramatic practice for their revisions in their own work while writing assignments. Second drafts provide fertile areas for more practice. What better time to instill in students the desire and necessity for combining sentences for a rich text? Students may also like to practice on papers of other students, to make suggestions that will aid their writing.

Cooper defines the first major sentence-combining area as noun modifiers. These are words that change the meanings of nouns. To say in one sentence what one would sometimes say in two is the goal. Simple adjective word embeddings are as follows:

—before the subject

The boy threw the frisbee.

The boy is *young* .

*The young boy threw the frisbee.

—before the object

I saw a movie.

The movie was *good* .

*I saw a good movie.

—before predicate nominative

He was a policeman'

The policeman was *cautious* .

*He was a cautious policeman.

—before object of a preposition

She was in the garden when it began to rain.

The garden was *sunny* .

*She was in the sunny garden when it began to rain.

Practice in each of these embeddings should be presented separately. The order of the presentation is of no consequence if labels such as subject or predicate nominative are not being used. Students should operate comfortably with one area before they move on to another.

Participle embeddings should be drafted as follows:

—ing

Joe slapped the horse.

The horse *gallops* .

*Joe slapped the galloping horse.

—ed

The street had potholes,

The city *repaired* the patholes.

*The street had repaired

The next area to be explored should be compound adjectives.

He wore a sweater.

Moths had *eaten* the sweater.

*He wore a moth-eaten sweater.

Joe saw the plant.

Bugs *eat* the plant.

*Joe saw the bug-eaten plant.

Embeddings should also give the student practice with adverbs.

The woman is a lawyer.

The woman is *downstairs* .

*The woman downstairs is a lawyer.

The exercises should be presented quickly, intensely, and enthusiastically. Many different methods may be used. I plan to use a combination of an overhead projector and worksheets. A few examples may be prepared in advance for an overhead, and students can generate further examples. Games may be employed. Students may divide sentences into their kernel parts at the board. They may also combine kernels that the teacher provides. Teams may be formed and races held. Fluency should be striven for in these exercises. Sentences may be searched for in literature books. Students may find sentences that appeal to them. These sentences can be the basis of an exchange of sentences either in their completed form or in kernel parts. When received by fellow-students, the sentences can be reconstructed or divided depending on their initial form.

Students must practice in order to gain fluency. The main thing is to get students interested in the sentence to give them a chance to separate sentences and reconstruct them—to get them thinking. Once students show a fluency with single word embeddings, they should proceed to adjective phrase embeddings.

—prepositional phrases

The woman is my mother.

The woman is *in the library* .

*The woman in the library is my mother.

—appositive phrases.

My older brother is an electrician.

My older brother is *Nat* .

*My older brother Nat is an electrician.

—participial phrases

—ing

Betty stepped over the dog.

The dog was *carrying a stick* .

*Betty stepped over the dog carrying a stick.

—ed

The exercises were hard.

The exercises were *assigned by the gym teacher* .

*The exercises assigned by the gym teacher were hard.

—infinitive phrases

I was given a bicycle for Christmas.

The bicycle was *to ride*.

*I was given a bicycle to ride for Christmas.

—adjective clause embeddings involving who, when, which, that, when, or where.

People drive large cars.

People aren't interested in conserving fuel. (who)

*People who aren't interested in conserving fuel drive large cars.

Johnny likes comic books.

The comic books present a continuing story. (which)

*Johnny likes comic books which present a continuing story.

I love some mornings.

I am happy. (when)

*I love some mornings when I'm happy.

This is the class.

I learn the most. (where)

*This is the class where I learn the most.

—multiple adjective embeddings

The man was fat.

The man was short.

The man had a heart attack. (who)

*The man who was short and fat had a heart attack.

The above combinations and embeddings will probably take students several weeks to become comfortable with. For all, it will be a new experience; let them enjoy themselves. Examples from students' own writings should be added to teachers' examples. The teachers even like to set up a small corner where students may put sentences that they encounter in their reading on index cards. Above all, any tedium should be disassociated from sentence-combining. These exercises should be fun. Once students have mastered the above material concerning nouns and their modifiers, they are ready to deal with words and phrases that substitute for nouns.

—noun substitutes

—fact clauses

SOMETHING made him sad.

His father died, (the fact that)

*The fact that his father died made him sad.

SOMETHING made his parents very proud.

Billy delivered the address at graduation. (that)

*That Billy delivered the address at graduation made his parents very proud.

—question clauses

We wondered SOMETHING.

Those new neighbors lived somewhere before. (where)

*We wondered where those new neighbors lived before.

The train dispatcher tried to tell us SOMETHING.

The train had derailed somehow (how).

*The train dispatcher tried to tell us how the train had derailed.

My Spanish teacher did say SOMETHING

Someone should practice his Spanish diction. (how often to)

*My Spanish teacher did say how often someone should practice his Spanish diction.

My father is not sure of SOMETHING.

Someone calls someone if the electric garage door opener needs fixing.

—noun phrases

—gerund phrases

SOMETHING was his favorite pastime.

He swam in the Pacific Ocean. (swimming)

*Swimming in the Pacific Ocean was his favorite pastime.

He liked SOMETHING.

He rode his bicycle in the hills. (riding)

*He liked riding his bicycle in the hills.

—infinitive phrases

SOMETHING was her desire.

She wanted to get an A in geometry. (to get)

*To get an A in geometry was her desire.

He tried SOMETHING

He went to the midnight show. (to go)

*He tried to go to the midnight show.

—multiple embeddings

SOMETHING bothered my sister.

The college refused her request for a scholarship. (the fact that)

The college was Dartmouth.

My sister wrote a letter to Mr. Jones. (who)

The letter was well-written

The letter was angry.

*The fact that Dartmouth college refused her request for a scholarship upset my sister, who wrote a well- written, angry letter to Mr. Jones.

Once students become accustomed to the signaled exercises, the instructor should see improvement in their writing. They may want to try some of the complicated open exercises presented in Strong's Sentence-Combining: A Composing Book. These exercises do not have one correct answer; they are closer to the task a writer faces—that of making stylistic choices. An early problem may be:

1. The cars come cruising up Broadway.
2. The cars are glittering.
3. The paint is harsh.
4. The paint is metallic.
5. The paint is highly waxed.
6. There is a rumble of exhaust.
7. The rumble is great.
8. Lights explode softly on the scene.
9. The lights are for the street.
10. The scene is primitive.

Possible transformations include:

The glittering cars come cruising up Broadway. Their harsh paint is metallic and highly waxed. There is a great rumble of exhaust. The street light explodes softly off the primitive scene.

Or-

The cars that glitter come cruising up Broadway. Their paint is harsh, metallic, and highly waxed. There is a great rumbling of exhaust. Street lights explode softly off the scene—which is primitive. ¹²

Either choice is acceptable. A much longer, more involved example is "Alcohol and Marijuana:" part of which appears below:

1. Drunkenness leads to 30 to 50 percent of all arrests made.
2. The arrests are on the average.
3. The average is national.

4. Cirrhosis ranks sixth.
5. The ranking is causes of death.
6. Cirrhosis is a disease.
7. The disease affects the liver.
8. Alcohol causes cirrhosis. ¹³

The student has many options available for combining the above sentence.

The teacher will never lack for examples. Pick up any book, magazine, any printed matter whatsoever, and the source of sentence-combining material is available. Learning can be fun. A sentence from a short story a class is reading may be taken, separated, and students can put it together. The sentence then can be presented as it appears in the story—and results compared. Some students may have produced a sentence which pleases them more than the original. We are all sentence- combining geniuses}

Lesson plan I

Objective:

To introduce signaled sentence-combining

Materials:

1. overhead projector
2. grease pen
3. outline of simple embeddings before the subject

Procedure:

1. Present the following sentence pairs.
 - a. The boy threw the frisbee.
 - b. The boy is young.
 - a. The school is dirty.
 - b. The school is new.
 - a. The man is drowning.
 - b. The man is Caucasian.

- a. The bikes needed fixing.
 - b. The bikes are red.
2. Using the overhead combine the first group of sentences for the students
 3. Have the students combine the second group of sentences.
 4. Go over the sentences and have the students do the remaining.
 5. Provide the students with additional examples to explore at their seats.
 6. Let the students exchange these examples and discuss possibilities.

Lesson plan 2

Objective:

To introduce the sentence-combining corner and its use

Materials:

- a. index cards
- b. box of the appropriate size
- c. literature books

Procedure:

- a. Explain that the corner is for the students' use at any time. It is a place for exploration.
- b. The students can place sentences on the top of large index cards in either the final form or in their component parts.
- c. The students are to place their names in the corner of the cards.
- d. Students may combine or break the sentences in the component parts and put their names next to their work.
- e. Periodically, students should check back on the work done on their cards.
- f. Discussion to ensue.

Lesson plan 3

Objective:

Introduction of open exercises

Materials:

- a. overhead projector
- b. prepared dittoes
- c. composition

Procedure:

Place the following example on the overhead:

1. The cars come cruising up Broadway.
 2. The cars are glittering.
 3. The paint is harsh.
 4. The paint is metallic.
 5. The paint is highly waxed.
 6. There is a rumble of exhaust.
 7. The rumble is great.
 8. Lights explode softly on the scene.
 9. The lights are for the street.
 10. The scene is primitive.
- b. Have the students generate a combined sentence of the first group of sentences.
 - c. Students are to compare the results.
 - d. Using their own compositions, students are to revise a paragraph using sentence-combining.
 - e. Collect revisions and originals and comment.

Notes

1. Kellogg Hunt, "How Little Sentences Grow into Big Ones," rpt. in Alexander Frazier ea., *New Directions in Elementary English* (Champaign: NOTE, 1967), p. 117. 2. Kellogg Hunt, "Teaching Syntactic Maturity," rpt. in G.E. Peren and J. Trim, eds., *Applications of Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 298. 3. Hunt, "Teaching Syntactic Maturity," p. 299. 4. Hunt, "Teaching Syntactic Maturity," p. 299. 5. William S. Palmer, "Research on Grammar: A Review of Some Pertinent Investigations," *High School Journal*, 58 (March 1975), pp. 252-254. 6. James Squire, cited in Eileen J. McGuire, "Sentence-Building and Transformational Grammar," *English Journal* 56 (May 1967), p. 747. 7. Eileen J. McGuire, "Sentence-Building," p. 747. 8. Frank O'Hare, cited in Wm. Strong, "Sentence-Combining: Back to Basics and Beyond," *English Journal*, 65 (Feb. 1976), p. 60. 9. William Strong, *Sentence-Combining: A Composing Book* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 10. 10. Charles Cooper. "An Outline for Writing Sentence-Combining Problems," *English Journal*, 62 (June 1973), p. 99. 11. William Strong, "Sentence-Combining: Back to Basics," p. 60. 12. Strong, *A Composing Book*, pp x & xi. 13. Strong, *A Composing Book*, p. 132.

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