Sentence combining
Improving sentence quality, complexity and variety

Sentence combining is an instructional technique used to improve sentence quality, complexity and variety. Students are taught how to combine two or more basic sentences to create more interesting, sophisticated and varied sentences. When sentence combining is taught explicitly and in a sustained way, it becomes one component of successful writing instruction.

The **baby** *cried* + The **baby** was **hungry** = The **hungry** baby *cried*

Evidence

More than 85 studies on sentence combining have been conducted over the past 50 years. Most have demonstrated that sentence combining improves students' sentence-level writing across years and ability levels. Some studies have also demonstrated improvement in students' overall writing quality and revision abilities. The research also indicates that sentence combining has a more positive impact than traditional grammar instruction on sentence construction, writing accuracy and writing quality[1].

Further research is required to test whether students can focus on higher-order writing abilities better once sentence-level writing is mastered and whether improved sentence-level writing translates to students' compositional writing[2]. It is also worth noting that many of the more recent studies have been conducted with small sample sizes and often with students with learning disabilities, rather than the more general student population. The evidence-base would benefit from more studies with larger sample sizes to further understand the impact of sentence combining on students' writing outcomes.

Benefits

Sentence combining was developed as an alternative to traditional grammar instruction (for example, labelling parts of speech or 'diagramming' sentences). Unlike traditional grammar instruction, sentence combining can be used with sentences drawn from students' own writing or from texts used in any unit of study.

Sentence combining builds students' ability to write a range of compound and complex sentences. It can be used to improve sentence construction by targeting incomplete sentences, run-on sentences, overly simple or repetitive sentences, or the overuse of 'and'. A focus on capitalisation or punctuation can also be easily embedded in sentence combining instruction.

This guide is one in a series of practice guides on evidence-based writing instruction in the classroom. It is intended for use across year levels and discipline areas.

For this guide, AERO has synthesised the most rigorous and relevant evidence-based practices and is informed by our literature review. AERO has rated these sources of information against its Standards of evidence, focusing on evidence generated in an Australian context where possible.

Our focus on sentence combining, and more broadly teaching writing, aligns with the Australian Curriculum Content Descriptions and the National Literacy Learning Progressions. This guide also aligns with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

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1   Andrews et al. 2006

2   Saddler et al. 2018, Nemans 1995, Saddler and Asaro-Saddler 2009, Graham et al. 2019

Sentence combining is a suitable instructional technique for students across year and ability levels. It can be particularly beneficial in supporting students who write how they speak, rather than using the more formal, or academic style of language required for writing.

What does it look like in practice?

Present students with basic sentences (either taken from their own writing or content materials) and give explicit instruction in how to combine these sentences into more complex and varied sentence forms. Sentences can be combined by:

- using conjunctions to combine two or more sentences into one, or
- isolating essential information from an otherwise redundant sentence and embedding that key information into the base sentence (see examples in table on the next page).

Steps to teach sentence combining

1. Explain the purpose of sentence combining to students (to improve sentence quality, complexity and variety).

2. Explain that there is often more than one acceptable sentence combination.

3. Model how and why combinations are made using several worked examples. Start with simple sentences, narrate your thinking and justify your combination selections.

4. Explain that students can move words, add or delete words, or modify words to create optimal combinations.

5. Guide practice, supporting students to develop a range of solutions.

6. Students complete independent practice, followed by supportive whole-class discussion to evaluate different combinations. This helps students understand other possible options for revising their own writing.

Given there are often a range of sentence combinations available to students, it can be helpful to provide feedback on effectiveness of sentence combining. Effectiveness involves:

- clarity of meaning
- rhythm
- audience suitability.

Which combination has the most clarity, which has the best rhythm, and which captures both author intent and audience suitability? Through modelling and guided practice, students can be taught how to improve sentence clarity, rhythm and audience suitability.

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Examples of sentence combining[3]

Modifying nouns using adjectives	Embedding clauses (using who, when, where)
The baby cried. The baby was hungry. The hungry baby cried.	That was the restaurant. We stopped for pizza. That was the restaurant where we stopped for pizza.
Modifying verbs using adverbs	**Coordinating conjunctions** (creating compound sentences)
The woman ran five kilometres. The woman ran quickly. The woman quickly ran five kilometres.	She liked reading. I liked writing. She liked reading and I liked writing.
Applying grammatical morphemes (-s, -'s, -ing, -ed, -en, -er, -est)	**Subordinating conjunctions** (creating complex sentences)
I saw the dog. The dog sleeps. I saw the sleeping dog.	I will be late for school. I pack my bag quickly. I will be late for school unless I pack my bag quickly.
Embedding phrases (prepositional phrase, appositive/noun phrase)	**Pronoun substitutes using questions or phrases** (for example, answering what or why)
The woman is my Grade 2 teacher. She is in the library. The woman in the library is my Grade 2 teacher. Melbourne is the most livable city. Melbourne is a very popular travel destination. Melbourne, the most livable city, is a very popular travel destination.	The teacher made her stay behind after school. She never understood it. She never understood why the teacher made her stay behind after school. She ran through the park. It was her favourite form of exercise. Running through the park was her favourite form of exercise.

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[3]   Cooper 1973, Strong 1986, Saddler 2012

Role of scaffolds

Initially, cues should be provided as a scaffold. There are two types of cues: providing a word or underlining a key word to prompt a particular word sequence.

I will be late for school.

I pack my bag quickly. (unless)

I will be late for school unless I pack my bag quickly.

The baby cried.

The baby was hungry.

The _____ baby cried.

Once students demonstrate a degree of skill with cues, begin to fade them. Once cues are removed, sentence combining tasks are considered 'open' rather than 'cued'. Open tasks shift the responsibility on to the student. They are required to weigh up what they consider important versus redundant information, to combine an optimal sentence. Students can then transition to reviewing and reworking sentences in their own writing, initially with support.

Ways to increase scaffolding:

- Provide additional worked examples.
- Provide additional guided practice.
- Circle or highlight the words that are the same in each sentence and model removing redundant information.
- Oral rehearsal with a peer or teacher before written construction.

Ways to decrease scaffolding:

- Move from 'cued' to 'open' tasks.
- Increase the number of sentences to combine.
- Increase the complexity of the sentences or ideas.
- Provide a category cue rather than a single word cue (for example, use a cause-and-effect conjunction; use a time conjunction).
- Provide a conjunction word list, and get students to generate a range of solutions, before discussing the responses in pairs or as a class.
- When there are a range of possible solutions, ask students to generate more than one combined sentence.