

Dancing with the Authors

Bev Matulis

My dream is to teach my students to create sentences that gracefully lead the reader across the page. I want my students to develop a love of beautifully choreographed writing, an appreciation of the rhythm, and a firm understanding of how writing conventions allow the reader to follow the author's lead and step into the experience.

Each year, when my fifth graders turn in their first writing assignments, I am confronted with a daunting series of writing missteps: sentence fragments, run on sentences, missing commas, too many commas, choppy sentences, etc. — I know that these students have received instruction in sentence structure, but the rampant errors show that the lessons haven't transferred into student writing.

Sentence fluency is an essential writing skill, but it is very difficult to teach in a way that transfers into student writing. Many teachers rely upon daily language practice, grammar worksheets, or English books. I decided to search for a different approach. While working on my own composition skills at the Saginaw Bay Writing Project and at a Teachers College Writing Project Institute, I learned to study the work of my favorite writers. I studied their writing holistically for ideas, organization and details, but then I began to study their work at the sentence level.

Don and Jenny Killgallon have written a valuable resource for students and teachers: *Sentence Composing for the Elementary School*. (They have resources for middle, high school, and college, too.) The Killgallons have searched through the best literature to find examples of sentences that can be used as models for several essential sentence structures. This was the resource that I was looking for. I use these "worktext" booklets to showcase sentences composed by authors, and then I invite students to imitate these model sentences.

I, like many teachers, was not a master grammarian. The Killgallon resources helped me to build a solid understanding of complex sentence structures. The authors have divided their "worktext" resource into units, and each unit features one sentence structure and many opportunities to imitate and unscramble model sentences.

Every two weeks we focus on one type of sentence structure from the Killgallon text, and I ask students to construct new sentences that utilize the featured structure. During our analysis of a model sentence, we always locate the base sentence. Later, when students imitate the model sentence, they begin by creating a base sentence, and then they tack on a phrase or clause. Students learn that you can insert a phrase as a sentence opener, sentence closer, or between the subject and the verb.

It takes more than one week to master a sentence structure. We practice the 'dance' steps throughout the days and weeks in many ways:

1. I extend the exposure to a sentence structure by asking students to find the featured sentence structure in the books that they are reading at silent reading time. When students locate such a sentence, they show it to me, and if they have correctly identified a sentence structure, they get to add a dried bean to our incentive jar. They can earn an additional bean if they copy the sentence on a note card and write an imitation. (We have periodic celebrations when all the beans get transferred into the jar.)
2. In addition to locating the featured sentence structures during silent reading time, students begin finding these sentences in other texts. When they partner-read their Social Studies book, I often have a student team come up to me and say, "Look, we found an appositive phrase!" I ask them to capture that sentence on an index card and add it to our collection. In this way they learn that these sentence structures are part of informational writing as well as narrative writing.
3. For morning work, I sometimes use sentences that students have found, and have students compose new sentences based on these models.
4. Each week I ask students to use vocabulary or spelling words and create a sentences using the featured structure. We listen to and evaluate sentences that students create and choose three that will be part of our spelling test.
5. When students conduct a study of their favorite author, they collect model sentences in their writers notebook, categorizing them, and later, they use these to create their own sentences. This becomes a valuable resource when students are revising their own compositions during writing workshop.
6. Every few weeks, we take a week to review the structures we've learned, and then students take a quiz. They are asked to compose one of each of the sentence structures that we've studied. This keeps all of their dance moves fresh and available for their own writing.

This extended engagement has proven to be an important link because students develop fluency and confidence. In a very natural way, my students begin to create more complex sentences in their own writing, and they truly begin to feel like they are dancing along with the authors.

As the students study sentence structure and imitate literary models, they come to see how, as a reader, the sentences gracefully waltz you across the page. Students come to enjoy the dance experience, both as a reader and as a writer.

I am always delighted when I see how students infuse their own lives into their carefully composed sentences. When they share their sentences, we get a little window into each child's life. I share my sentences, too. It is a very effective way to get to know each other and build community.

The following prepositional phrase sentence is one of the model sentences:

"Captain Eaton, in his good blue coat, was shouting orders from the quarterdeck."
— *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, Elizabeth George Spear

Taylor's love of basketball is infused in his imitation of the model sentence:

"Taylor, from the three point line, swooshed a three pointer to win the game."
— Taylor

Another student used the following model sentence to build an appositive phrase sentence that depicts a moment taken from her own life:

"Cotton, the kitten, went up the tree but could not come down."
— *Petunia*, Roger Duvoisin

"Sophie, my baby sister, laughed and cooed as I talked to her."
— Emily

When students create effective sentences with dependent phrases and clauses, they become experts at evaluating their own sentences. For example, if I asked Emily to identify her base sentence, she would know that, "Sophie laughed and cooed as I talked to her," was the core of her complex sentence. She has also learned how commas are used to set off the appositive phrase. As students construct their own sentences, instead of just identifying these sentences on a worksheet, they take a giant step toward actually understanding a variety of sentence structures and actually using these structures in their own compositions.

Participial phrases became a favorite for many of my students. They love seeing how the verbs create vivid action images. One of my students used a participial phrase as both a sentence opener and a closer. Her core sentence is in the center. The sentence topic is taken from a family vacation memory:

"Relaxing on the sunny beach, I build sandcastles next to the shore, shaping a moat for the king and his bride."
— Jenna

While pursuing my National Board Certification, I documented evidence of student learning. Now, each year, I use the beginning of the year writing pieces to evaluate baseline level of sentence fluency for each of my students. Last year, seventy-five percent of my students had significant sentence structure errors throughout their writing pieces. Then, at the end of the year, I found that eighty percent of my students had eliminated their baseline sentence errors, and seventy-eight percent had used complex sentences in their compositions. Here is an excerpt from an end of the year assignment:

At night, when everyone is calmer, we get ready to do what we do every time; we launch fireworks. We all bring chairs and drinks and settle down to watch the sparks of light. When we launch the first firework, it explodes into a blaze of glory, to celebrate the signing of the Declaration of Independence, July 4th.

— Josh

This is real evidence of learning. My students have learned the moves. They're dancing!

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Discussion Questions

1. If you choose to use this sentence imitation approach for teaching sentence composing, consider how this process helps students understand about writing mechanics and parts of speech.
 2. The article, "Dancing with the Authors," involves students in the study of sentence structure over a long period of time and utilizes several different methods: imitating model sentences, locating a specific sentence structure as they read the works of favorite authors, collecting and imitating favorite authors, integrating sentence composing with spelling practice, evaluation of the sentence compositions of peers, etc. How is this approach different from one you may be using currently? What are the strengths in this method, and what are the concerns you have about teaching writing with this method as part of your instructional approach?
 3. Look over a few effective sentences from the student samples in this piece. Pay specific attention to sentence structure and sentence variety. Imitate several of these sentences in order to develop an understanding of how this author creates effective sentences. Discuss with colleagues how this activity may influence future modeling with students.
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Professional Resources:

Killgallon, Don & Jenny. *Sentence Composing for Elementary School: A Worktext to Build Better Sentences.* Teachers and students will find this textbook an innovative, creative, and enjoyable alternative to traditional grammar texts aimed at dissecting sentences. Instead, it engages children in learning how to build better sentences.

Killgallon, Don & Jenny. *Sentence Composing for Middle School.* Unlike traditional grammar books that emphasize the parsing of sentences, this worktext asks students to imitate the sentence styles of professional writers, making the sentence composition process an enjoyable and challenging one.