

Teaching Grammar
in a
Meaningful Context

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Stair Steps:

1. Write the sentence and cross out the prepositional phrases.
2. Ask "What's happening?" THIS IS THE ACTION VERB.
If you don't find an action verb, check your list of being verbs.
3. Ask "Who/what _____?" THIS IS THE SUBJECT.
verb
4. Ask "_____ what?" THIS IS THE D.O.
subject action verb
5. Ask "_____ to/for whom?" THIS IS THE I.O.
subject action verb D.O.

4. Ask "What renames _____?" THIS IS THE P.N.
subject
5. Ask "What describes _____?" THIS IS THE P.A.
subject

To find an adjective:

6. Ask "What kind of _____ is it?" THIS IS AN ADJ.
nearby noun

To find an adverb:

7. Ask "_____ why, where, how, to what degree?"
nearby verb, adj, adv
THIS IS AN ADV.

Students must work these steps one time for each verb in the sentence. This helps us find functions of clauses and verbals as well as the regular parts of a sentence.

Teaching Grammar in Context

from Don Killgallon's *Sentence Composing for Middle School*)

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And *Sentence Composing for High School*

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When students practice these four steps with sentences from literature, they will not be able to help learning grammatical constructions and good writing at the same time.

I use these steps with sentences from the books we're reading, but I also use sentences from my students' own writing. Plus, students are doing a lot of writing as they take part in these exercises. They will imitate good writing, put many sentences together, and write their own sentence parts to expand existing sentences.

Unscramble

We spend a little time talking about how to break a sentence into meaningful chunks. Then we spend most of our time putting those chunks back together to make a sentence. Sometimes students come up with a totally new order, something that still makes sense as a sentence, but I wouldn't have thought of it if I were just looking at an answer key.

Imitate

As we practice unscrambling, we gather more familiarity with the grammatical constructions in the separate chunks. Then students are ready to imitate and create their own new sentences by following a model. Students will create their own sentences to follow a particular pattern.

Combine

Students practice decombining and combining. We practice breaking apart a long sentence into shorter sentences. We also look at shorter sentences which can be combined to form longer, more effective sentences. Students begin to understand the effects of putting a dependent clause here or a participial phrase there.

Expand

Finally, students are able to take a short sentence and add parts to make it more effective. If our focus is participial phrases, I'll give students a list of sentences and ask them to add a participial phrase in a particular place. Students are now ready to put these grammar skills to use in their own writing.

I created the following grammar exercises using passages from novels my students read.

The grammar work is based on exercises created by Don Killgallon.

Answers and original text appear in Appendix A.

UNSCRAMBLE:

Unscramble the eight sentences which form this paragraph from Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons*. Put them back together in a meaningful order, which might not be the same order as the original. Next decide how to order the sentences to re-form the paragraph.

1. in the breeze / waving / no bird / I saw / only leaves
2. the most beautiful birdsong / of that tree / I heard / when I was younger / coming from the top
3. that tree / I passed / I listened / every time
4. itself / at the leaves / that it was the tree / I stared up / it seemed / the longer / the more
that was singing
5. a call / with trills and warbles / a true birdsong / it was not / it was
6. hoping / beneath that tree / of the bird / who was singing / to catch sight / such a song / I stood /
for the longest time
7. beside the barn / a tall aspen / next to my favorite sugar maple tree / is
8. sometimes it did not / I always called it / sometimes / the singing tree / it sang / but from then on

IMITATE #1:

The model sentence below has two imitations. Unscramble the imitations. (One makes sense. The other is nonsense.) You should be able to match the chunks in each sentence to the chunks in the model.

MODEL: I stood / beneath that tree / for the longest time /
hoping / to catch sight / of the bird / who was singing / such a song.

1. who was swimming / from his neighborhood / with the greatest courage / lunging / he ran /
to reach the girl / such a stroke / into the ocean
2. for their coach / to feel pride / under their toothbrushes / trying / who was wagging /
with the biggest smiles / such a tail / the eggs flopped

IMITATE #2:

In this passage from *The Pearl*, highlight each of the following:

1. a sentence with more than one adverb clause
2. a sentence with inverted word order
3. a sentence with a series of infinitive phrases

The brothers, as they walked along, squinted their eyes a little, as they and their grandfather and their great-grandfathers had done for four hundred years, since first the strangers came with argument and authority and gunpowder to back up both. And in the four hundred years Kino's people had learned only one defense--a slight slitting of the eyes and a slight tightening of the lips and a retirement. Nothing could break down this wall, and they could remain whole within the wall.

The gathering procession was solemn, for they sensed the importance of this day, and any children who showed a tendency to scuffle, to scream, to cry out, to steal hats and rumple hair, were hissed to silence by their elders. So important was this day that an old man came to see, riding on the shoulders of his nephew. The procession left the brush huts and entered the stone and plaster city where the streets were a little wider and there were narrow pavements beside the buildings.

Write each sentence you highlighted. Then write an imitation of each sentence.

COMBINE #1:

Decombine the following sentences.

1. The brothers, as they walked along, squinted their eyes a little, as they and their grandfather and their great-grandfathers had done for four hundred years, since first the strangers came with argument and authority and gunpowder to back up both.

John Steinbeck, *The Pearl*

2. John Thornton was eating dinner when Buck dashed into camp and sprang upon him in a frenzy of affection, overturning him, scrambling upon him, licking his face, biting his hand—"playing the general tom-fool" as John Thornton characterized it, the while he shook Buck back and forth and cursed him lovingly.

Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*

3. When the other two had trotted down the beach to look back at the mountain he had followed them for a few yards and then stopped.

William Golding, *The Lord of the Flies*

COMBINE #2:

Combine the following pairs of sentences into just one sentence by making the underlined portion part of the first sentence. In some cases, you might also choose to eliminate other parts of the first sentence. Sentences are taken from *Walk Two Moons*, by Sharon Creech.

1. We had dinner at the Finneys. It was an experience.
2. When we arrived, Mary Lou's brothers were running around like crazed animals. They were jumping over the furniture and tossing footballs.
3. Mary Lou's older sister was named Maggie. She was talking on the telephone and plucking her eyebrows at the same time.
4. Mr. Finney was cooking something in the kitchen. He enlisted the help of four-year-old Tommy.
5. Phoebe whispered something to me. She whispered, "I am not too optimistic about the possibilities of this meal."

Killgallon's steps

Unscramble Take a sentence from something you are reading with your students.
Break it into chunks and scramble the chunks.

two mongrel dogs
in the rain
an old man
of disproportionate size
whose black face
in the relaxed early-evening avenue
as wet pebbles
shines golden-brown
under the streetlamp
is walking

Imitate Ask your students to write an imitation of the patterns in the sentence they just unscrambled. Or give them a new set of sentences, broken into chunks, and ask them to imitate the patterns. They can write sentences that make sense, or they can write nonsense imitations.

So we beat on/boats against the current/borne back ceaselessly/into the past.

And they move forward/planes into the wind/ground back endlessly/toward the terminal.
But he carries on/fly in the ointment/speeding off always/into bad traffic.

Combine Give your students a de-combined sentence from literature and ask them to make the simple sentences into one larger sentence. They'll have coordinate and subordinate to make it work. They'll practice using transitions.

God holds you over the pit of hell.
Sometimes a person holds a spider over the fire.
Sometimes a person holds some loathsome insect over the fire.
God abhors you.
God is dreadfully provoked.

Expand Give your students a new sentence with part of it missing. Put a slash mark in the place of the missing part. Ask students to write their own specific grammatical construction to fit in that space. Make them write out the entire new sentence.

Add an adverb clause.
/, the wind died, and the clearing was quiet again.

Add a participial phrase.
Lennie knelt down and drank, /.

from "The Sea Devil"
by Arthur Gordon

A

The skiff, flat-bottomed, was moored off the sea wall. He would not go far, he told himself. Just to the tumbledown dock half a mile away. Mullet had a way of feeding around old pilings after dark. If he moved quietly, he might pick up two or three in one cast close to the dock. And maybe a couple of others on the way down or back.

He shoved off and stood motionless for a moment, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the dark. Somewhere out in the channel a porpoise blew with a sound like steam escaping. The man smiled a little: porpoises were his friends. Once, fishing in the Gulf, he had seen the charter boat captain reach overside and gaff a baby porpoise through the sinewy part of the tail. He had hoisted it aboard, had dropped it into the bait well, where it thrashed around, puzzled and unhappy. And the mother had swum alongside the boat and under the boat and around the boat, nudging the stout planking with her back, slapping it with her tail, until the man felt sorry for her and made the captain let the baby porpoise go.

B

The skiff moved on. At last, ten feet apart, a pair of stakes rose up gauntly out of the night. Barnacle-encrusted, they once had marked the approach from the main channel. The man guided the skiff between them, then put the paddle down softly. He stood up, reached for the net, tightened the noose around his wrist. From here he could drift down upon the dock. He could see it now, a ruined skeleton in the starshine. Beyond it a mullet jumped and fell back with a flat, liquid sound. The man raised the edge of the net, put it between his teeth. He would not cast at a single swirl, he decided; he would wait until he saw two or three close together. The skiff was barely moving. He felt his muscles tense themselves, awaiting the signal from the brain.

Behind him in the channel he heard the porpoise blow again, nearer now. He frowned in the darkness. If the porpoise chose to fish this area, the mullet would scatter and vanish. There was no time to lose.

C

A school of sardines surfaced suddenly, skittering along like drops of mercury. Something, perhaps the shadow of the skiff, had frightened them. The old dock loomed very close. A mullet broke water just too far away; then another, nearer. The man marked the spreading ripples and decided to wait no longer.

D

He swung back the net, heavier now that it was wet. He had to turn his head, but out of the corner of his eye he saw two swirls in the black water just off the starboard bow. They were about eight feet apart, and they had the sluggish oily look that marks the presence of something big just below the surface. His conscious mind had no time to function, but instinct told him that the net was wide enough to cover both swirls if he could alter the direction of his cast. He could not halt the swing, but he shifted his feet slightly and made the cast off balance. He saw the net shoot forward, flare into an oval, and drop just where he wanted it.

E

Then the sea exploded in his face. In a frenzy of spray, a great horned thing shot like a huge bat out of the water. The man saw the mesh of his net etched against the mottled blackness of its body and he knew, in the split second in which thought was still possible, that those twin swirls had been made not by two mullet, but by the wing tips of the giant ray of the Gulf Coast, *Manta birostris*, also known as clam cracker, devil ray, sea devil.

F

The man had heard the tremendous slap of the great mammal's tail and the snorting gasp as it plunged away. He felt the line go slack again, and he raised his dripping face, and he reached for the bottom with his feet. He found it, but now the water was up to his neck. He plucked at the noose once more with his lacerated hand, but there was no strength in his fingers. He felt the tension come back into the line as the ray began to move again, and for half a second he was tempted to throw himself backward and fight as he had been doing, pitting his strength against the vastly superior strength of the brute.

But the acceptance of imminent death had done something to his brain. It had driven out the fear, and with the fear had gone the panic. He could think now, and he knew with absolute certainty that if he was to make any use of this last chance that had been given him, it would have to be based on the one faculty that had carried man to his preeminence above all beasts, the faculty of reason. Only by using his brain could he possibly survive, and he called on his brain for a solution, and his brain responded. It offered him one.

He did not know whether his body still had the strength to carry out the brain's commands, but he began to swim forward, toward the ray that was still moving hesitantly away from the channel. He swam forward, feeling the rope go slack as he gained on the creature.

G

The man took one last deep breath, and he went down under the black water until he was sitting on the bottom of the bay. He put one foot over the line so that it passed under his bent knee. He drove both his heels into the mud, and he clutched the slimy grass with his bleeding hand, and he waited for the tension to come again.

The ray passed on the other side of the stake, moving faster now. The rope grew taut again, and it began to drag the man back toward the stake. He held his prisoned wrist close to the bottom, under his knee, and he prayed that the stake would not break. He felt the rope vibrate as the barnacles bit into it. He did not know whether the rope would crush the barnacles, or whether the barnacles would cut the rope. All he knew was that in five seconds or less he would be dragged into the stake and cut to ribbons if he tried to hold on, or drowned if he didn't.

He felt himself sliding slowly, and then faster, and suddenly the ray made a great leap forward, and the rope burned around the base of the stake, and the man's foot hit it hard. He kicked himself backward with his remaining strength, and the rope parted, and he was free.

H

He came slowly to the surface. Thirty feet away the sea devil made one tremendous leap and disappeared into the darkness. The man raised his wrist and looked at the frayed length of rope dangling from it. Twenty inches, perhaps. He lifted his other hand and felt the hot blood start instantly, but he didn't care. He put his hand on the stake above the barnacles and held on to the good, rough, honest wood. He heard a strange noise, and realized that it was himself, sobbing.

High above, there was a droning sound, and looking up he saw the nightly plane from New Orleans inbound for Tampa. Calm and serene, it sailed, symbol of man's proud mastery over nature. Its lights winked red and green for a moment; then it was gone.

Slowly, painfully, the man began to move through the placid water. He came to the skiff at last and climbed into it. The mullet, still alive, slapped convulsively with its tail. The man reached down with his torn hand, picked up the mullet, let it go.

He began to work on the slipknot doggedly with his teeth. His mind was almost a blank, but not quite. He knew one thing. He knew he would do no more casting alone at night. Not in the dark of the moon. No, not he.

More Killgallon-inspired ideas:

- For whatever grammar work you're doing,
always pull sentences from the reading you're doing at the time.

PLACEMENT OF ADVERBS:

Slowly, painfully, the man began to move through the placid water.

Here, we can play with the idea of putting adverbs in different places. How does that affect meaning?
How does it affect the flow of the sentence or the emphasis that is placed at the beginning or at the end?

- **Have students find their own sentences.**

Always have students find their own sentences. You might start by asking them to find ones that they like. Collect them on the overhead or on sentence strips. Then analyze the grammar of the sentences. How does it affect us to read a simple sentence as opposed to a Faulknerian super-complex sentence? How do different types of verbs affect our understanding or reading experience?

- **Choose simple sentences that are long and still simple.** Surprise students with how long a simple sentence can be.

She'd loved her home so much, always had some project underway — wallpapering, painting, refinishing furniture. (*The Chocolate War*)

Goober put on the brakes, slackening his pace, coming finally to a halt. (*The Chocolate War*)

From Spitzbergen through the Arctic, and across Canada and the Barrens, he had held his own with all manner of dogs and achieved to mastery over them. (*The Call of the Wild*)

- **Have students combine simple sentences to form compound and complex sentences.**
- **Discuss the differences.** Sometimes a simple sentence works best for the situation. Sometimes compound or complex is a better choice. Talk about the effect of a different type of sentence on a literary or rhetorical situation.

from *As I Lay Dying*

I made it on the bevel.

1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.
2. There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam.
3. The water will have to seep into it on a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across.
4. In a house people are upright two thirds of the time. So the seams and joints are made up-and-down. Because the stress is up-and-down.
5. In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joints and seams are made sideways, because the stress is sideways.
6. Except.
7. A body is not square like a crosstie.
8. Animal magnetism.
9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.
10. You can see by an old grave that the earth sinks down on the bevel.
11. While in a natural hole, it sinks by the center, the stress being up-and-down.
12. So I made it on the bevel.
13. It makes a neater job.