

Sentence Combining: Building Skills through Reading and Writing

by Deborah Dean

One of the marks of a skilled writer is the ability to use sentence structure to enhance meaning; helping students develop that ability is the purpose behind sentence combining.

Experienced writing teachers understand the concepts from *The NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing* (2004)—that students learn to write by writing, that teachers can help students become better writers, and that reading and writing are related—and will see how sentence combining (SC) helps students not only develop new strategies for expressing ideas but also find new ideas to express.

Here I provide some principles for effective sentence combining, explain how teachers can create activities that connect to the work they do in their individual classrooms, and give examples of what those activities might look like in practice. My specific examples are from a high school class, but sentence combining activities can be valuable for students at various grade levels, and can be adapted for students' needs through the choice of examples and targeted writing skills.

Principles for Effective SC

Talk and reflection are activities essential to students' gaining the benefit of SC.

Students' work with sentences should not be seen as only a written activity nor a right/wrong exercise to be corrected. Neither students nor teachers should see the combinations as limited to only one correct way.

Sentence combining should provide a time when students practice, even play around, with sentences and then explore the effects of their play. Students should have opportunities

to talk about what they are doing in their practice.

I recommend asking students to combine a set of sentences in at least two different ways; then ask them to star the one they like best. As students share their examples, have them explain why they starred the one they did. The rest of the class should discuss the differing effects of the variety of examples that are shared.

To be most effective, sentence combining should connect to the texts students are reading and writing.

Although some resources are available to help teachers with SC (see list, page 11), the best SC work involves teachers designing sets of sentences for their own students related to whatever students are reading and writing.

I usually work with two sets of kernel sentences in one class period—and that takes ten to fifteen minutes. But I sometimes use only one set, if I need more class time for other content concerns. Regular work with sentences is more beneficial than infrequent lengthy exercises.

Once students understand the concept of kernel sentences, it is beneficial for them to write their own sets of kernel sentences to trade with classmates. By doing this, they learn how complex sentences really carry many ideas, and teacher preparation time is reduced even further.

How to Create Open-ended SC Activities

To create open-ended activities (see definition, below), first find one or two sentences, in the reading for the class, that you think are particularly effective or that contain structures you want your students to learn. Use those as the basis for your kernel sentences.

When my class was going to be reading a short biography of Nat King Cole, I selected this sentence from that reading to be the basis of that day's SC activity: "He settled on the West Coast, playing in clubs and bars and eventually on his own radio show, with a trio of piano, guitar, and bass that featured a beautifully blended sound" (*Jazz: My Music, My People*, by Morgan Monceaux. Knopf, 1994. p. 48).

Two Forms of Sentence Combining: Open-ended and Cued Sentence

Sentence combining occurs in two different ways: Open-ended and cued. (See examples in text.)

With open-ended sentence work, students are given a set of short, simple sentences (often called kernel sentences) which they are asked to combine in any way they can.

Open-ended combining offers the opportunity for students to find a variety of ways to combine ideas, leading them to discover that differing combinations encourage different interpretations. On the other hand, students are also limited to what they already know how

to do with sentences.

Cued sentence combining provides cues to the writer to suggest a specific number of ways to combine the kernel sentences. With cues, students have fewer options for combining than they have with open-ended SC, but they are given the opportunity to learn new sentence structures they might not otherwise have considered using.

The best approach is a combination of these two, methods moving back and forth between open-ended and cued.

From that sentence, I created the following set of kernel sentences:

He settled on the West Coast.
 He played in clubs and bars.
 Eventually he played on his own radio show.
 He played with a trio of piano, guitar, and bass.
 His trio featured a beautifully blended sound.

When I used this particular sentence exercise in class, my students already had experience with sentence combining and de-combining. Travis, one of my students, declared in class that he could have created several more kernel sentences than I did—and he went on to prove it on the chalkboard.

I was very pleased to see that he could break the sentences down as small as he did. It didn't hurt my feelings; instead, I was glad that he could see what I had been trying to teach. So, if you aren't as good as your students at creating the exercises, don't worry. They'll help.

How to Create Cued Sentence Sets

Creating cued sentence sets is a little more involved—and a task I generally don't give to my students. The process isn't too dissimilar from what I've already described:

- Determine what kinds of constructions might be most beneficial for your students to learn.
- Find sentences in their reading that contain those constructions.
- Write these in kernel sentences, like the open-ended example shown previously.

Here's the difference: these kernel sentences include cues for how to combine them. To create these cued sets, I follow directions given by Bill Strong in his book *Creative Approaches to Sentence Combining* (NCTE/ERIC, 1986. p. 25):

*Begin with the base clause.
 Underline items that should be added or kept.
 Put punctuation, added words, or word-endings in parentheses after the sentence in which they should be included.*

As an example, the following sentence from *The Pearl* by John Steinbeck contains an appositive:

"The ants were busy on the ground, big black ones with shiny bodies, and little dusty quick ants" (3).

If I want students to learn to create that structure, I add cues to the kernel sentences, creating this exercise:

The ants were busy.
 They were on the ground. (,)
 There were big ones.
 The big ones were black.
 The big ones had shiny bodies. (WITH) (,)

And there were little ants.
 The little ones were dusty.
 The little ones were quick.

Although creating cued sentence sets is a little more involved, they can be constructed relatively easily and come directly from the texts students are reading. Like all writing, producing cued sentence sets gets easier with practice.

A sample practice exercise is provided on page 8.

How to Use SC to Teach Punctuation

- Show students how the targeted punctuation functions in a sentence.

If I wanted my students to learn to use commas in compound constructions, for example, I would show them some compound sentences—either examples I created or, preferably, examples from our reading.

Examples of teacher-created compound sentences:

The teacher said to get in our seats, but one student ran around the room.

I tried to ride my bike no-handed, and I broke my arm doing it.

We can discuss our assigned question in the classroom, or we can go into the hall to practice our skit.

- Have students de-combine some of the examples to see how they contain multiple ideas.

The first example sentence could be de-combined as follows:

The teacher said something.

She said to get in our seats.

One student did something else.

That student ran around the room.

- Discuss with students the structure of compound sentences along with the placement of the comma before the conjunction.
- Create sentence sets that will help students write compound sentences. Have students work in groups or as a class to combine sentence sets and punctuate them following the pattern in the examples previously discussed.

Example

I want something.

The something is to eat burgers.

My mom is making something.

The something is fried chicken.

From this particular set, if students are following the pattern, they should create the following sentence: "I want to eat burgers, but my mom is making fried chicken."

- After students work through a few sets of sentences together to gain experience, finish by having students generate their own compound sentences, correctly punctuated. ▶

Sentence Combining—Practice Exercise

Combine each set of sentences below into one effective sentence, using the lines provided. Then use the four sentences you've written as the start and complete a paragraph with your own opinion on the topic, writing on a separate sheet of paper. You may agree or disagree with the position established, and may revise the initial four sentences as desired. For example, "I think banning cell phones in school is a bad idea because..." or "I am glad cell phones are banned in schools because..." Add *at least* four more well-constructed sentences of your own, imitating some of the sentence patterns created in the four starter sentences.

- Cell phones are banned.
- They are banned in our school. (BECAUSE THEY)
- Cell phones cause distractions.
- The distractions are to learning.

- Some students use cell phones to text.
- They text during class.
- They don't pay attention to the lesson.

- Sometimes students use texting to share answers
- The answers are for a test.
- Sharing answers isn't fair to other students.

- Cell phones allow students to take pictures.
- Sometimes students take pictures in locker rooms. (THAT)
- These pictures could embarrass other students.

The same process just described can be used to teach many types of punctuation. The sentence sets that follow were created for a lesson on using a colon effectively.

Sentence Set

The principal made one request.
The request was simple.
The request was to leave cell phones at home.

Sentence Set

An issue arose.
It arose during the school meeting.
It was a huge issue.
The issue was how should schools deal with cell phone use.

Possible combinations for the above sets include the following:

The principal made one simple request: Leave cell phones at home.

A huge issue arose during the school meeting: How should schools deal with cell phone use?

After students work through examples, discussing the effects of using a colon in this type of construction and practicing as a class, they are ready to write with their own content.

After a similar lesson, students were asked to write their own sentence explaining something in *Twelve Angry Men* and using a colon in the way we had practiced.

An example of two resulting sentences is shown at the bottom of the page.

How to Use SC to Write New Sentence Structures

To teach new sentence structures, consider what examples your current class reading provides that would also be beneficial for students to learn. Some texts have more of one structure than another, but well written novels usually offer examples of almost any device a teacher might want to teach. You can target the structure using a process similar to what has already been described:

- Draw students' attention to the target structure in sentences in the reading.
- Explain what the structure is and discuss how it functions.
- Create sentence-combining activities that help students practice writing the targeted structure, first as a class, and then individually.
- Finally, ask students to write their own sentences or paragraphs using the structure.

Here's an example of how this worked for me. In reading *Twelve Angry Men*, I realized that the script had several sentences containing relative clauses. Two such examples are:

"You come in here and you vote guilty and then this slick preacher starts to tear your heart out with stories about a poor little kid who just couldn't help being a murderer."

"Switch-knives came with the neighborhood where I lived."

I thought that practicing with relative clauses would help students improve their writing, so I created sentence sets from sentences in the play. Here are several examples:

Sentence Set

"This is a quiet, frightened, insignificant man who has been nothing all his life, who has never had recognition—his name in the newspapers."

This is a quiet man.

This is a frightened man.

This is an insignificant man.

He has been nothing his whole life.

He has never had recognition.

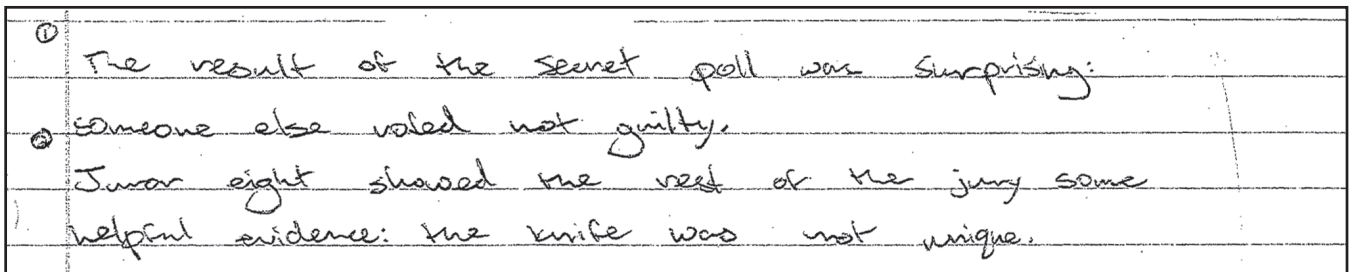
He has never had his name in the newspapers.

Sentence Set

"We're going to find out how a man who's had two strokes in the past three years, and who walks with a pair of canes, could get to his front door in fifteen seconds."

We are going to find out something.

That something is how a man could get to his front door in fifteen seconds. ▶



Example: Two student sentences that use a colon.

The man has had two strokes in the past three years.
The man walks with a pair of canes.

Using one of the sentence sets above, a student created the following sentence:

He is a quiet, frightened, insignificant man who has been nothing his whole life, received no recognition and has never been in the news.

Students were then asked to create their own sentences containing relative clauses about one of the jurors in the trial. Here is one student's work:

My own
~~is now that the old man could get to his front door in a second~~
 juror
 Eight
~~He was not a very good person, do you know what that something is? It's how often the old man, and the court down.~~
~~But can you really see what that man says, he has had two strokes in the past three years, and now he walks with a pair of canes.~~
 FOUR
 This is a wealthy, ~~man~~ man who thinks himself superior. He is a talented speaker who thinks he knows what should happen.

SC and imitating isn't always easy work, as the example from Megan shows. But students like the challenge of it; many of my students who didn't do much other writing were willing to write when we played around with sentences this way.

How to Use SC to Teach Summary Writing

This activity requires that students have some experience with kernel sentences and combining. Not only will they be creating kernel sentences as the activity begins, but they will also be combining those kernels with combining techniques of their choice.

- Begin by providing students with copies of the text to be summarized. I recommend using informational text that

serves as background to the literature being discussed.

In the following example, students were preparing to read *Twelve Angry Men*. They were given one double-sided page of information about the history and purpose of jury trials, with these directions:

For each main idea in the reading, write a short summary sentence (a kernel sentence).

When you have a list of short sentences that address the key points, trade your paper with someone else.

Create a fluid paragraph that effectively summarizes the main points of the reading, using the kernel sentences you've been given, along with what you know about combining sentences effectively.

This might include using words such as *although*, *whenever*, *because*, or adding *-ing* or *-ed* to verbs to combine one sentence with another, or turning kernel sentences into words (adjectives) or phrases (appositives).

To get you started, the first few kernel sentences for the background reading on juries might be these:

1. Jury trials are a fundamental civil liberty.
2. Juries make legal decisions.
3. Those decisions are given to a judge.
4. In a bench trial, all decisions are made by judges.

An example of a student's response to this assignment appears below:

A jury trial is a legal proceeding where a jury makes decisions. This system is a fundamental civil right in the UK and the U.S., but not in other countries. King Henry II made a system to settle disputes using juries; he also made the "grand jury". The jury is responsible for finding the facts for the case, and for that reason, jury trials in the US tend to be high profile. Juries are sometimes seen as checks against state power.

How to Use SC to Prompt Writing

One way to use sentence combining is as a prompt for more extended writing. In the 1980s, when SC was more prevalent in classroom instruction, some critics charged that its practices didn't allow students to do their own writing—that it only had them writing exercises.

In order to make sure that students are actually writing their own ideas during sentence combining, teachers can create writing prompts using SC.

- Start with an intriguing or thought-provoking sentence from whatever students are reading. It could be a sentence that you think will spark discussion or one that students select as an important idea from the reading.
- Break the sentence into kernel sentences to create an SC practice exercise, either open-ended or cued.
- Ask students to both combine the sentences and respond to the idea of the constructed sentences.

For students who were studying *Twelve Angry Men*, I created the following writing prompt, using a sentence from the play:

"I have always thought that a man was entitled to have unpopular opinions in this country."

I have thought of something.

I have always thought of it.

I have thought a man was entitled in this country.

He was entitled to have opinions.

The opinions are unpopular.

Students are asked to combine the set of sentences into one sentence in two different ways. Two possible responses are shown below:

I have always thought something: That in this country a man was entitled to have unpopular opinions.

I have always thought that a man was entitled to have opinions in this country even if they are unpopular ones.

Either combination works, but each emphasizes a different aspect of the idea.

Then, after combining the kernel sentences in two different ways, students are given this prompt:

Choose the combination you like best and use it as the beginning sentence in an opinion paragraph. Do you or do you not agree with the sentiment expressed in the sentence? Why or why not?

To complete this response, students might explain that they think expressing unpopular opinions can only go so far, or they might explain that they think some unpopular opinions are easier to express than others—and give examples. They might even disagree. Their writing, then, serves as preparation for class discussion at the same time as it gives them practice with SC.

What do students notice about using sentence combining? Sometimes it's hard to say. For one thing, the benefit to student writing doesn't happen immediately. And sometimes the writing gets a little worse before it gets better, as students experiment with structures they are unfamiliar with. But an authentic exploration of sentence combining does eventually lead to improved student writing. Research shows it, and my own experience supports that research.

Asking students to reflect on their learning is a valuable way to make sure they see SC not simply as an exercise but as important to their development as writers. After the lesson on relative clauses, students wrote about how their new understanding could make a difference to their writing. Although they still had work to do with punctuating relative clauses, many students commented that they felt the "flow" of their writing improved, that they were able to say more things in a shorter space, and that they started to see more possibilities as they wrote.

Observations like these illustrate a deepening awareness in these young writers, and speak to the useful role these exercises can play in the classroom.

Acknowledgement: Many of the student examples I used come from students in Jake Rees' classes at Lone Peak High School, Highland, Utah. I thank Jake for trying out my activities with his students and thank the students for allowing me to use their writing as examples.

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Recommended Resources on Sentence Combining

Killgallon, Don. *Sentence Composing for High School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.

— . *Sentence Composing for Middle School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997.

Killgallon, Don, and Jenny Killgallon. *Grammar for High School: A Sentence-Composing Approach*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007.

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Strong, William. *Sentence Combining: A Composing Book*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994.

— . *Writer's Toolbox: A Sentence-Combining Workshop*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996.