Classroom Notes Plus

A QUARTERLY OF TEACHING IDEAS

AUGUST 2008

Deepening students' reading and writing are the focus of this issue of *Classroom Notes Plus*. You'll find a lesson in which a picture book and collaboration help students analyze characters in a novel, a sequence of sentence combining exercises to adapt to your own students' needs, and tips for how to use worksheets strategically to support writing instruction.

Download this issue and related handouts from the August 2008 *Classroom Notes Plus* page at http://www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/cnp.

In This Issue

A Picture Book Helps Students "Read" Characters 1

by Alisa Fisher

A picture book gives a light-hearted lead-in to a reading and writing activity based in character study, close reading, and collaboration.

Sentence Combining: Building Skills through Reading and Writing 6

by Deborah Dean

Sentence combining can help student writers develop new strategies for expressing ideas and enhancing meaning. This lesson outlines exercises you can easily customize to your own students' needs.

To Worksheet or Not to Worksheet: Using Student Writing to Direct Instruction in Grammar and Mechanics 12

by Dave Ellison

These detailed tips give guidance on how an oft-misused tool—the worksheet—can lend itself to sound writing instruction and support individual student learning.

A Picture Book Helps Students "Read" Characters

by Alisa Fisher

This is a multi-step activity I developed after about three years of teaching middle and high school English students. It may be best suited to middle school students, but I have also found it effective with general-track tenth graders.

My goals were to get students to use their knowledge of people and their critical thinking skills to arrive at a more meaningful understanding of a novel's characters, as well as to provide review of and practice with adjectives. This activity requires close reading of the text, recording character details on a handout page, and collaborative group work. I schedule three days to complete it.

Having students record and support character details through close reading certainly isn't a new idea, but this variation includes a few twists, such as the use of a picture book about adjectives, that make it especially engaging and effective.

This activity is suitable for use with any novel, but I lean towards those novels with one or two main characters because the characters tend to be more thoroughly developed, or "round" vs "flat," and are thus easier for students to tackle. I find it works especially well in novels with two main characters, such as Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* and Robert C. O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah,* because it is easier for students to see how each character is unique or distinct when utilizing comparison. I have also used this activity successfully with Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

I normally start this activity once we are far enough into the novel to have a grasp of the main characters, but not so far that the students see how the characters evolve in terms of the central conflicts of the plot.

I look at it as more of a getting-to-know you character activity. Completing the activity at this point also allows for some interesting discussions once the novel is finished in terms of dynamic and static characters. However, there is no reason why it couldn't be completed at the conclusion of the novel as a final character analysis.

Getting Started

I introduce the activity by discussing with students the methods of characterization that authors use to develop characters. I ask questions like, "How do we get to know characters in a new story or novel?" or "How do authors

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help us get acquainted with their characters?" I use leading questions like these to get students thinking about details of characters' physical appearance, speech, thoughts and feelings, actions, and the opinions other characters have about them.

I also invite students to consider books and stories they have read, especially recently, because it's often easier for them to generate an answer if they have a specific character in mind. Typical student responses might include:

> Ponyboy in *The Outsiders* looks a certain way. His slicked back hair, jeans, and leather jacket make him a part of the Greasers.

> In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry,* Cassie has no problem speaking her mind to others.

If students are having trouble coming up with ideas, I might read aloud a sentence with character detail from a recent novel we've read, and ask students what they learn or infer about the character from this passage.

We then talk about how a reader can take the author's "clues" about characters in order to come to an understanding about them, and I use this as an opportunity to bring up the role of adjectives. I mention that adjectives are valuable words for writers, since they help define characters and scenes and make them come alive for the reader. This serves as a handy lead-in to the next step.

Reviewing Adjectives with a Picture Book

At this point I tell students I'm going to share a spectacularly illustrated nonfiction book about adjectives, titled *Many Luscious Lollipops,* and written by Ruth Heller.

Depending on the grade level and language ability of the class, some students may feel it's a little silly, but it's a light-hearted way to explore the topic, and is especially helpful to any students who are still learning to recognize and use adjectives.

Besides being a great adjective review, *Many Luscious Lollipops* offers engaging, vivid pictures, and uses a rhythm and rhyme scheme that lend itself to a lively delivery, whether read aloud by the teacher or by student volunteers. Here's a sample stanza from page 2:

> "An adjective's terrific
> when you want to be specific.
> It easily identifies by number, color, or by size.
> TWELVE LARGE, BLUE, GORGEOUS butterflies."

> Reprinted with permission from *Many Luscious Lollipops* by Ruth Heller. (Scholastic, Inc., 1989). Used by permission of Grosset and Dunlap, a division of Penguin Books for Young Readers. Copyright ©1989 by Ruth Heller.

After we finish *Many Luscious Lollipops,* I prompt students to talk about their reactions, by asking questions like "What did you like best?," "Which page was your favorite?," "What are some of the categories of adjectives you learned about?," and "How could this book help you improve your own writing?"

Character Analysis: A Collaborative Exercise

Next I tell students that they are going to put their knowledge of characters and adjectives to work with a cooperative group activity, based on the book we've started reading, *The Pigman*.

I give each student a two-sided handout of a graphic organizer like the sample shown on page 3. (Download this handout page from the August 2008 *Classroom Notes Plus* web page at www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/cnp/issues) Then I give students the guidelines for their assignment.

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Handout on ____________________ (Character Name)

passage:

word:

passage:

word:

word:

passage:

word:

passage:

Download this handout page from the August 2008 *Classroom Notes Plus* web page at http://www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/cnp/issues

Student Assignment

In a few minutes I will assign you into small groups of 3-4 students. Your job is going to be to think of four distinct adjectives to describe John and four distinct adjectives to describe Lorraine, as a group, and to record these words on your graphic organizer. Write the character's name in the center of the circle.

Each student is to fill out a copy of the two-sided handout page, one side for each character, even though you are coming up with the answers together.

You should think about what you have learned about the characters so far, considering their appearance, actions, thoughts and feelings, speech, what others say about them, and any other information you feel is relevant. Jot down possible adjectives as they come to you, consult the thesaurus and dictionary if you like, and confer with your group about your ideas.

After your group agrees on the first adjective, write down that word on the line closest to the center circle, and then look through chapters 1-5 of the text for a quote to support the chosen word. Once your group has agreed on the quote, write that down in the rest of the space.

There are four quadrants on the graphic organizer, one for each adjective and book passage.

The point of requesting "distinct" adjectives is so students will need to consider a variety of characteristics for each character, and won't simply choose multiple synonyms for the same characteristic.

When students begin working on identifying the adjectives that describe their character(s), I encourage them to talk and share ideas within their groups. The main point of having them work in cooperative groups is so they can bounce ideas off each other and expand their thinking.

I also circulate around the room to help and consult. A common problem is that a student will think of a word that is not an adjective, as in the example "John is a rebel." In this case I might respond, "Yes, that's true, but rebel is a noun. Let's see if we can find an adjective that carries the same idea."

I might also review the part of *Many Luscious Lollipops* which talks about creating an adjective by adding a suffix. From this a student will be able to figure out the adjective form of "rebel" is "rebellious."

Finding Support in the Text

Next I might say something like, "Now, can you find a passage from Chapters 1-5 (of *The Pigman*) that would show that John is rebellious?"

Typically someone in the group will say, "What about the time he let off bombs in the boys' bathroom at school?" and the students will begin paging through their books, searching for the example.

Typically, even if students haven't completed the book, at least one student can recall the location of the passage or get close enough that a few minutes of skimming yields the appropriate passages. When students get stuck they can describe the passage they're thinking of and I can usually help them find it. Referring back to familiar text is beneficial, because it helps students absorb the material, and in the process they often make a new insight into a character or another aspect of the novel.

Next, students record the adjective and corresponding passage (or as much as will fit, plus an ellipsis) in the graphic organizer. I also instruct students to record the page number of the passage for reference.

Once students are finished, each group shares their words, along with the passages that support them, and I make a master list on the overhead.

Here's an example of the master list of adjectives for John Conlan that we produced:

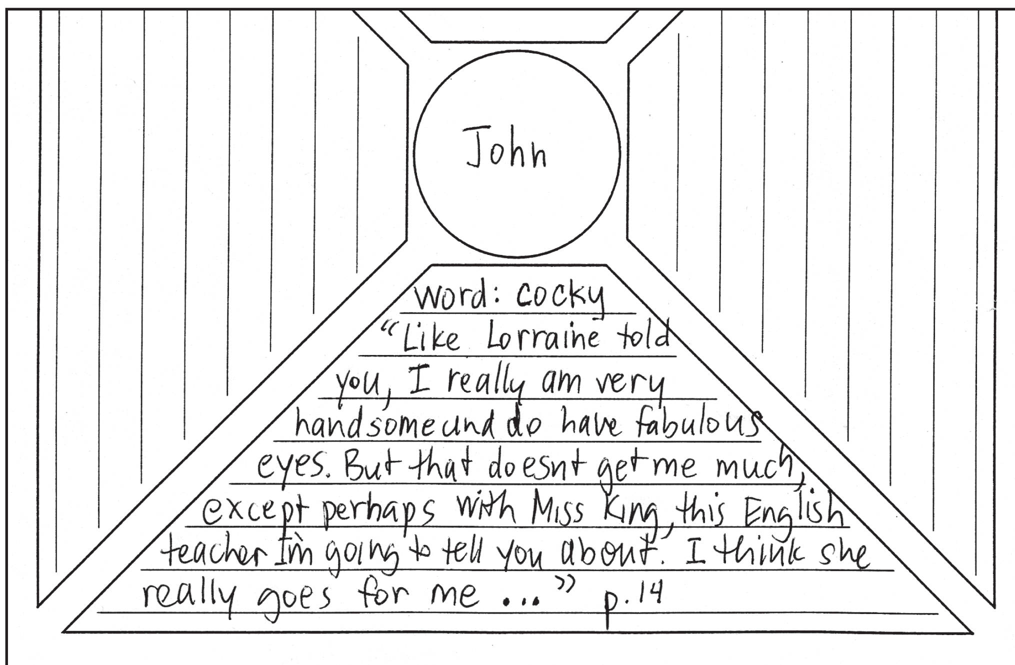
> angry, rebellious, indignant, immature, smart-mouthed, cocky, spiteful, creative, sullen, critical, obnoxious, handsome, cavalier, clever, observant, depressed, sarcastic, mischievous

Students enjoy the process of sharing their words as a class and justifying them with text references. As we proceed, I ask the class if there are any words that just don't fit, and if we agree that there are, then I cross those words out. When there is more than one character then we repeat this step.

Here are some sample pairings of words and passages produced in my class:

> ***Character:*** John Conlan from *The Pigman*
> ***Word:*** mischievous;
> ***Passage:*** "But on Wednesdays when I knew there was going to be a substitute teaching one of the classes, I'd pass the word at lunch and all the kids in that class would buy these scrawny apples. Then we'd take them to class and wait for the right moment-like when the substitute was writing on the blackboard. . . . Then I gave this phony sneeze that meant to hold them down near the floor. When I whistled, that was the signal to roll 'em. Did you ever hear a herd of buffalo stampeding?" p. 2

> ***Character:*** John Conlan
> ***Word:*** cocky;
> ***Passage:*** "Like Lorraine told you, I really am very handsome and do have fabulous eyes. But that doesn't get me much, except perhaps with Miss King, this English teacher I'm going to tell you about. I think she really goes for me the way she always laughs a little when she talks to me and says I'm such a card." p. 14



Sample Quadrant for *The Pigman*

Character: John Conlan
Word: spiteful
Passage: "Now it was just the way I said yeah that set him off, and that night when he got home, he just put the lock on the phone and didn't say a word. But I'm used to it. Bore and I have been having a lot of trouble communicating lately as it is, and sometimes I go a little crazy when I feel I'm being picked on or not being trusted. That's why I finally put airplane glue in the keyhole of the lock so nobody could use the telephone, key or no key." p. 16

During this step where we share adjectives and talk about the characters, I can tell from students' comments that they are developing a more analytical stance toward the characters as a result. Here's a representative exchange:

Student #1: "I don't think 'angry' fits John. He just isn't an angry type of person. He may act out at school or with his parents, but that's just his rebellious way of responding to the adult world of rules. John is free spirited and doesn't want to conform."

Student #2: "You're right, when John acts like a smart aleck it's more in defiance of adults and their rules than it is out of hatred."

Journal Entry

Finally, after students examine our master list, I assign a journal entry either as in-class writing or as homework. The prompt is "Which three adjectives are most accurate in describing John and why?" and I ask students to write one paragraph of four to six sentences.

The purpose of this reflection is to have students analyze the list more deeply and to bring closure to the activity.

Here's a sample journal entry:

"I think John is cocky, rebellious, and clever, because almost from the very start of the book John is getting into some type of trouble.

He has problems with just about every adult he comes into contact with and he does not deal with criticism well. He seems like the type of person who always thinks the other person is wrong. He also seems smart because when he plans to do something, like the bathroom bombs or apple roll, it's usually extra well-planned out or unusual, so this is why I would say he's clever."

This activity takes approximately three days to complete, and is open to modification—for instance, to spend more time on adjective use or on discussion of the reading. It lends itself to end-of-the-book discussions because you can return to the list when students are done reading and talk about whether the adjectives still fit the characters. You can also discuss static and dynamic characters—review the terms briefly, and then ask students which characters they see change or grow throughout the novel, and how they change. Do students see changes in minor characters like Norton and Lorraine's mother?

A variety of discussion and writing topics are possible based on the adjective exercise, the completed character handout sheet, and the journal entry assignment.

Overall, I consider this activity effective because it makes students think, gives them a chance to work together and bounce their ideas off one another, and promotes closer reading of the text.

Alisa Fisher, St. Bernard-Elmwood Place High School, Cincinnati, Ohio

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 <u>on the ground.</u> (,)
There were <u>big ones.</u>
The big ones were <u>black.</u>
The big ones had <u>shiny bodies.</u> (WITH) (,)
<u>And</u> there were <u>little ants.</u>
The little ones were <u>dusty.</u>
The little ones were <u>quick.</u>

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."

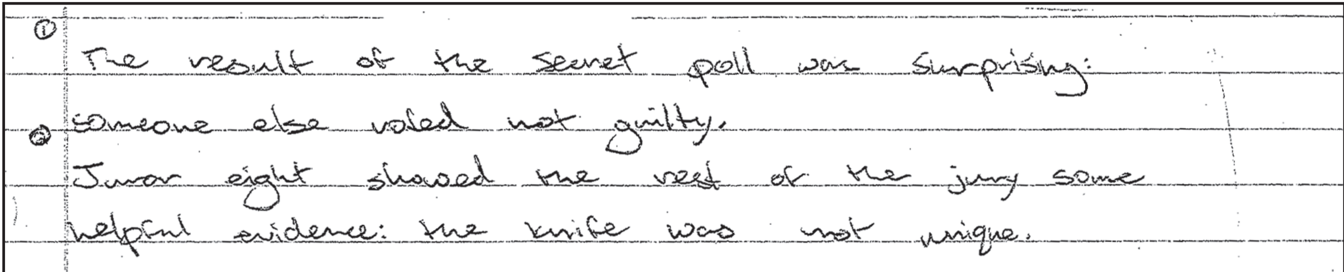
I thought that practicing with relative clauses would help students improve their writing, so I created sentence sets from sentences in the play. Here are several examples:

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.


① The result of the secret poll was surprising: someone else voted not guilty.
② Juror eight showed the rest of the jury some helpful evidence: the knife was not unique.

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, frightend, insignificant man who has been nothing his whole life, recieved 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
>
> Four
>
> This is a wealthy, man who thinks himself superior. He is a talented speaker who thinks he knows what should happen
>
> MY OWN

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 othe 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 U.S. 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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—. *Sentence Composing for Elementary School*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000.

—. *Story Grammar for Elementary School: A Sentence-Composing Approach*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2008.

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

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

To Worksheet or Not to Worksheet: Using Student Writing to Direct Instruction in Grammar and Mechanics

by Dave Ellison

This article started as a conversation with *English Practice* co-editor Joanne Panas as to how and when worksheets for the purpose of teaching grammar, punctuation, and usage can be considered best practice. In subject areas such as math and chemistry, it's safe to say worksheets provide valuable opportunities to perform numeric operations or balance equations. In English language arts classes, using worksheets is not so straightforward.

After teaching at six different high schools in three districts, I have noticed many ELA colleagues have the persistent belief that if they aren't including fifteen to twenty minutes of discrete grammar, punctuation, or usage instruction several times a week they're shirking their responsibilities. Another factor encouraging ELA teachers to use stand-alone worksheets is the simple fact there are scads of them—everywhere! The ubiquity of these resources makes them hard to resist.

Students can deepen their understanding of grammar, punctuation, and usage concepts if their teachers can learn to be more strategic. Here's how.

Whenever students provide a writing sample, it's an opportunity for informal assessment as to their skills in a given area. The key is to develop a mindset of collecting "data" and tailoring the instruction to fit the needs of the students. This practice of adjusting instruction based on the information that students are providing is at the heart of the assessment-to-instruction cycle.

The teacher takes on the role of a grammar diagnostician and thereby resists the temptation to fix individual student errors, which we all know has negligible payback for all involved. Instead, the teacher looks for patterns of errors displayed by a number of students, and then creates a worksheet by simply compiling the recurrent errors from the students' own work. An even simpler way of doing this is to write the sentences on the board and have pairs of students work to correct them (this has the added benefit of saving paper).

There are immediate benefits to both the teacher and the students by using this approach. The teacher doesn't have to stop and flag errors on student papers but can devote energy to providing descriptive feedback on the actual focus of the writing assignment. Students benefit because this type of feedback is more individualized and promotes their understanding of the big ideas. Descriptive feedback takes time, but it's time well spent. It is a key component of formative assessment—assessment for and as learning—that acknowledges we don't have to assess everything every time.

The students who display a weakness in an aspect of grammar, punctuation, or usage get the important message that they aren't the only ones. Finally, an added benefit of having student-generated sentences as the focal point for grammar, punctuation, and usage mini-lessons is they provide an opportunity to revisit the group discussion or piece of literature that was the basis of the student writing activity. Opinions or ideas that may not have been expressed are then shared.

I've used this approach over the years to cover everything from faulty pronoun reference to misplaced modifiers (always entertaining!) and vary it to include editing on topic sentences, sentence beginnings, and wordiness.

Another way I use student work is to create a worksheet by compiling a list of sentence "gems" to showcase well-crafted sentences. I try to tie this into an aspect of writing—usually in the course of reading and discussing literature—I have been trying to get students to notice, such as effective short sentences, active voice, creative sentence beginnings, etc. A simple way to use the "gems" worksheet is to have students circle a few sentences they really like and discuss their reasons in pairs, then share out to the whole group.

I still think there's a time and place for using conventional worksheets, especially on a selective basis with individual students; for example, the student who simply needs more practice to master the semicolon. When done in this manner, use of worksheets becomes part of differentiated instruction for supporting individual student learning.

What I have learned to avoid is the out-of-context, spirit-deadening, whole-class worksheet that wastes valuable instructional time. When I take my students into "grammar land" as I call it, I want them to recognize the material (they wrote it!) and know that we'll only stay long enough to learn something important.

When I collect subsequent writing samples, I'll look to see if the students are making the same mistakes. If some of them still are, I can do a few things to keep it on their personal radars, such as providing a mini-lesson prior to a writing activity, pointing out its proper use in published materials, or making it a focus during a peer editing exercise. It might also appear again on another worksheet of student-generated sentences—either as problem sentences or as "gems" for those who have mastered the particular concept.

The following are examples of two lists I put together for my students—"student sentence gems" and "student topic sentences." In the first case I asked students to pick a couple favorites and be prepared to explain what they liked. In the second, using topic sentences I'd selected from student

paragraphs on *Obason,* by Joy Kagawa, I asked students to rate the sentences in terms of four criteria: context, focus, fluency, and diction. In each case these exercises helped us discuss and evaluate effective writing.

Examples of Student Sentence "Gems"

These are all good examples of sentence fluency and variety. Pick out a couple of favourites and be prepared to explain what you like about them.

1. Now, I am not a cheater by nature, I'm just not the type, but with this teacher it was just too easy; it didn't seem wrong.
2. So my pen was vigorously scratching on the sheet of paper while my English teacher got closer and closer, looking over everyone's work to see if it was complete.
3. Over the years I have learnt that if you want to receive good grades, not only do you have to put effort into it, but you also have to have a good relationship with your teacher.
4. As I reached into the garbage which was full of candy wrappers and juice boxes, I dug through them as the pear had sunk to the bottom.
5. On the first day, he didn't have a pen or a pencil with him and had to borrow mine, which he never returned.
6. Our parents were outraged! I remember sitting in between my parents and the teachers and learning a very new vocabulary.
7. Her face was all red and blotchy. Her eyes were swollen and glossy.
8. When the class ends, the teacher leaves, and one of my classmates turns to me and says quietly, "You know what? The test we have just written—I saw it before:'
9. His hair was grey and slicked back, he wore a large belt that held a laser beam, a clock, a cell phone and other "necessary" tools.
10. I sat in the middle of the class, the exact same spot I sat within the world of marks; an average student with an average mark.

Examples of Student Topic Sentences

Below are 10 topic sentences from student paragraphs on the use of metaphor in Joy Kagawa's Obasan. *Rate on a scale of 1 to 4 in terms of how they:*

- *provide appropriate context for a paragraph*
- *establish a clear focus for a paragraph*
- *show sentence fluency*
- *use effective diction*

1. The iceberg metaphor is a very deep and thoughtful way of bring up the "silence" in the 1940's with the Canadian Japanese.
2. I thought this [well metaphor] was a good metaphor because it helped me to understand about the emotions that can hurt a person.
3. Kogawa's well metaphor points out how the effects of racism can affect the victim for long after the initial damage was done.
4. If a person has to deal with discrimination at an early age, it takes a toll on the child's emotions throughout his or her whole life.
5. Many extended metaphors are presented to the audience in "The Pool," starring an elderly Japanese-Canadian woman.
6. Joy Kogawa uses the metaphor of a well to explain her emotions.
7. The volcano metaphor is explaining how someone (a child) bottles up his or her feelings about discrimination.
8. The iceberg metaphor had a great impact on the way I look at self-consciousness.
9. I got lots out of the well metaphor.
10. Joy Kogawa used a metaphor that described the bottled up emotions of the Japanese people kept in internment camps during World War II by using a well.

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More Resources on Writing

Read the NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing at http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/write/118876.htm

New NCTE Policy Brief: Look for *Writing Now,* a new NCTE research policy brief, in the September 2008 *Council Chronicle*. *Writing Now* will also be available online on the NCTE website.

New Books!: Visit the NCTE bookstore at http://www.ncte.org/store/books for sample chapters from ***Strategic Writing: The Writing Process and Beyond in the Secondary English Classroom*** (grades 9-12), by Deborah Dean, and ***Designing Writing Assignments*** (grades 9-college), by Traci Gardner

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Picture books can seem out of place in the middle and secondary classroom, yet as these lesson plans show, picture books can provide accessible ways for students to learn and practice reading and analytical strategies that they then apply to longer, and often more complex, texts.

Reading and Analyzing Multigenre Texts

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=293

In this lesson plan, students develop a definition of multigenre texts by exploring a multigenre picture book, short chapter books, and, if desired, multigenre novels. Students explore what readers need to know to read and understand multigenre texts, discuss effective reading strategies, and then apply their knowledge to writing multigenre texts.

Picture Books as Framing Texts: Research Paper Strategies for Struggling Writers

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=306

Picture book models are used in this lesson to structure students' research projects, freeing students from the language of their encyclopedia sources and allowing them to focus their attention on the content of their papers.

Id, Ego, and Superego in Dr. Seuss's *Cat in the Hat*

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=800

The Cat in the Hat serves as a primer to teach students how to analyze a literary work using the literary tools of plot, theme, characterization, and psychoanalytical criticism. After exploring the elements in the picture book, students are ready to apply the technique to other texts that they read.

From Dr. Seuss to Jonathan Swift: Exploring the History behind the Satire

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=936

Begin your class study of *Gulliver's Travels* by reading Dr. Seuss's *The Butter Battle Book* to illustrate the use of satire in an accessible way. After exploring the historical allusions in Dr. Seuss's picture book, the whole class discusses and researches the history behind passages from *Gulliver's Travels*.

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