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Transforming Writers through Grammar Study

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Joan Berger

# Transforming Writers through Grammar Study

Joan Berger describes a two-year approach to grammar instruction in a middle school. Each month is devoted to a specific sentence variation with a small amount of daily class time for drills and writing assignments. The timeframe allows students to assimilate the concepts and apply them to their writing.

**M**y colleagues and I are fortunate: our students arrive with a passion for writing—comfortable choosing topics and writing from their hearts.

It's the perfect time to begin discussing sentence rhythms and variations that can enrich and empower their voices. We've developed a two-year grammar program for our seventh and eighth graders that is a springboard to sentence variety and self-confidence. (See sidebar on page 59.)

Students who begin the program writing choppy, simple sentences and frequent run-ons have, by their second year, turned into storytellers who use adverbial clauses, absolutes, and participial phrases gracefully, weaving their ideas together in effective prose. Fourteen-year-old Jake describes a Costa Rican climbing adventure: "Breaking a sweat, I lifted myself up, now exhausted, to the ledge where I could sit for a moment. Arms tensing and becoming stiff, I forced myself to stand up and get ready for the trip down. . . . I wanted to hesitate, enjoying the view there, under the canopy. Eyes widening in awe, I gazed over the vastness of the forest." Jake's moment of wonder comes alive with his use of participial and absolute phrases to add detail. The sentence variety in his writing is directly linked to his classroom experiences with grammar.

Three colleagues and I provide these experiences for students in our suburban Chicago middle school using four basic components. We (1) establish monthly grammar goals to introduce one sen-

tence variation each month, (2) commit to two or three fifteen-minute practice sessions each week, (3) integrate grammar skills into all student writing activities, and (4) identify grammatical constructs in the literature we read in class.

While students can learn grammatical structures and terms in one year, we have discovered that learning *to express ideas* with complex structures requires at least two years. One year's exposure to rich grammatical devices merely plants the seeds for their use in writers' minds. After one year, they can identify errors and correct them, they can discuss the various types of sentence structures, and they begin to integrate them into the narratives or stories they write. Their final drafts generally have far fewer errors and are much more interesting to read. But after one year, we've only just begun. Our experience is echoed in Constance Weaver's observation that "no matter what we do in teaching grammar, not all of our students will immediately, or even eventually, become versatile stylists and expert copy editors. Learning to use a greater range of syntactic structures . . . takes years, not days or weeks" (182).

## Organizing Grammar Study

From September to January, we introduce one sentence variation each month. In September, we introduce the compound sentence punctuated with comma or semicolon; in October, we move to adverbial clauses. In November, we review the previous

months; in December, we begin adjectival clauses and appositives; and by January we work on participial phrases. Spending time on single concepts over a span of weeks allows students to understand and correctly incorporate them into their personal writing. By gradually introducing these variations, we help students increase sentence elaboration and complexity, “hallmarks of language growth in the middle and high school years” (Strong 31). From February through May, our writing assignments ask students to put their new grammar knowledge to use. One teacher recently told me, “Even though I’m always behind, it’s not the timing that matters—it’s the sequence.” During the school year some teachers spend occasional minutes reviewing mechanics such as use of quotations or contractions or parts of speech, which students have learned in earlier years.

### Compound Sentences

When we introduce compound sentences in September, we ask students to memorize a set of rhyming signal words: *and, but, or; yet, so, for*. Nearly every unit begins in the same way, with signal words chanted aloud to help students identify their compound sentences, adverb clauses, or adjective clauses. After time, the signal words trigger unconscious reactions to punctuation so that students internalize the need for a comma or semicolon, a positive gain. We demonstrate on the chalkboard how two simple sentences can be combined with a comma and coordinating conjunction, with a semicolon, or with a semicolon followed by transitional words (conjunctive adverbs) such as *therefore, consequently, or in fact*. Asked to combine “Charlie felt sick during class” and “The nurse suggested he go home,” students consider various ways to combine sentences, and we supply information about punctuation—especially the semicolon—with which they are unfamiliar. Figure 1 shows the first section of an activity that allows students to think about sentence formation, use appropriate punctuation, and explain their reasons. More practice activities with compound sentences, adverb clauses, adjective clauses, and all of the other varieties we teach are accessible at our school Web site at <http://www.winnetka36.org/cw> under Curricular Links.

### Clauses

Signal words alert the writer or reader to punctuate sentences properly. In October, we introduce the following eleven signal words for adverb clauses, and we chant them for a week until they are memorized:

as, if,  
although,  
since, because,  
when, while,  
before, after,  
unless, until

We choose these commonly used subordinate conjunctions because we find they often appear in student writing; the signal words alert students to the position of the adverb clause in a sentence. Our rule is that when the adverb clause appears first (an introductory adverb clause—AC1), it must be followed by a comma, but when the adverb clause appears second—after the independent clause (AC2)—it does not require a comma. Some teachers use a chant to learn the conjunctions, create a mnemonic using the first letters of the words, or have students write a rap to learn them.

For adjective clauses, studied in December, students learn the signal words *who, whom, whose, which, and that*. Then they learn appositive phrases, a natural outgrowth of the adjective clause unit. By January, when we reach participial phrases, students combine sentences written on the chalkboard, making use of *-ing* or *-en* or *-ed* verb forms. Sentences such as “Marion saw a coin” and “She stooped to pick it up” are easily combined:

*Seeing the coin,* Marion stooped to pick it up.

Marion, *seeing the coin,* stooped to pick it up.

Students learn to identify these sentence variations quickly, especially when we look for signal words or word endings, and then they practice using them. We play charade-type games in the classroom, acting out certain emotions, recording the body language or actions corresponding to joy or disappointment, and using our lists of behaviors such as “dropping his head forward” or “opening

**FIGURE 1.** Comma and Semicolon Practice about an After-School Activity

*Directions:* As you read the following sentences, add any missing commas or semicolons. Then, fill in the blank that follows each sentence with the abbreviation that explains why you inserted the punctuation or left the sentence as it is.

AC1 = Adverb Clause First

AC2 = Adverb Clause Second

CS = Compound Sentence

CS/INT = Compound Sentence/Interrupter (Conjunctive Adverb)

SS = Simple Sentence

1. When I get home from school I relax with a cold drink. \_\_\_\_\_
2. I drink cola because I like it a lot. \_\_\_\_\_
3. My mom buys me soft drinks but she thinks they are bad for my teeth. \_\_\_\_\_
4. I listen to my radio or do my homework. \_\_\_\_\_
5. I have hockey practice on Wednesdays therefore I try to hurry with my homework. \_\_\_\_

Here are suggested answers for this worksheet:

- |                           |        |
|---------------------------|--------|
| 1. school,                | AC1    |
| 2. no comma               | AC2    |
| 3. drinks,                | CS     |
| 4. no comma               | SS     |
| 5. Wednesdays; therefore, | CS/INT |

his eyes wide” to write vignettes containing participles so that we put newly acquired punctuation knowledge into immediate use (Berger).

Our approach is not the much-maligned “kill and drill” of the past, since these activities require only ten to fifteen minutes to complete and discuss and therefore take up less than a quarter of a class period. Our units continue cumulatively so that exercises used in December contain all the sentence variations we have studied to that point—compound sentences, adverb clauses, adjective clauses, and appositives.

### Using Sentence Variations in Writing

The critical step after introduction of a new skill is to use it. Typically, we have students write a brief fairy tale, a summary of a piece of literature, or a paragraph about their lives, attempting to include speci-

fied grammatical ingredients. An assignment may ask them to “include three compound sentences, two adverb clauses, and a participial phrase—accompanied by labels or a key identifying each variation with a different highlighted color or underlining style.” Recently, I used ten minutes of class time for students to write a “grammar paragraph” about leaving school in the afternoon, using one example of each sentence variation we had studied. David, a fourteen-year-old who couldn’t resist a bit of humor, wrote: “As I walked out of the school, I saw a lot of kids talking with each other. (AC1) I walked out to a group of kids, who were my friends, and started to talk with them. (Adj. Cl.) Talking to them, I noticed one of their flys was unzipped. (Part.) I started to walk home, but I remembered that I needed my backpack. (CS) I grabbed my backpack with no effort because it was empty. (AC2)” Our material has “saturated students with new forms,” an approach that

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Don Killgallon sees as “the key to teaching the rhetoric of the sentence” (180). As students write their paragraphs, I assist anyone who feels unsure.

New grammatical formats become requirements in our formal writing assignments. Thus, the directions for a literary paper, such as a character analysis, instruct writers to “include and highlight two compound sentences

and two adverb clauses in your paper.” We insist on seeing students employ new sentence variations in their writing because “it is from repeated exposure that the brain hypothesizes rules and picks up a syntactic pattern” (Kischner and Wollin xiv).

### Sentence Combining

While the first year is devoted to learning about new sentence variations, during our second year we resort our punctuation rules into three simplified groups: compound sentences, introductory elements,

and essential and nonessential (or restrictive and nonrestrictive) elements. We reserve the discussion of essentials and nonessentials for the second year because students in the first year find it confusing. Having only three governing principles simplifies grammar knowledge and makes it easy

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In the second year, more importantly, we hope to see increased transference of sentence variation to students’ personal writing. To reach this goal, we refer to the artistic approaches, or “brush strokes,” that Harry R. Noden describes in *Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing*. This includes employing grammatical structures such as participles, absolutes, appositives, and adjectives shifted out of order to draw vivid pictures on paper the way an artist paints with a brush on a canvas. During writing projects, especially personal-narrative writing, we use materials based on Noden’s brush strokes plus some excellent sources for sentence com-

binning written by Killgallon, Strong, or Kischner and Wollin to promote “automaticity—the idea [that certain] behaviors such as linguistic transformations become habituated or automatic” when experienced often (Strong 32).

Since we need far less time during the second year for direct instruction of sentence variation, we have more time for fifteen-minute experiences with sentence combining. Sentence-combining activities are meaningful because experience with different sentence structures “helps turn unconscious practice into conscious knowledge and then solidifies the knowledge by having the students put it into immediate conscious practice” (Kischner and Wollin xi). Students compose sentences such as Paige’s “She [the angry neighbor] started to walk out, *her sandaled feet pounding furiously* into the gravel” or Claire’s “*Standing up straight, her long slender finger pointing* to the microwave, my mom demanded, ‘Go and open that door!’” Both students convey tension in sentences by using participles and absolutes effectively.

Well-crafted dramatic moments such as these emerged when we modeled vivid description, especially contrasting a strong paragraph with a weaker version of the same event. We followed the sample paragraphs shown in Figure 2 with an assignment to revise a narrative using all of the “advanced” grammatical techniques we had studied. Students returned to class proud of the tighter, more varied paragraphs they had crafted and surprised that they could employ their participles, absolutes, and adverb clauses with stunning effect.

Writing assignments like these—requiring use of newly learned sentence formats—help students gain independence as writers. Caroline reviewed her progress and concluded:

I learned how to combine related ideas with a compound sentence, how to add detail with appositives or with adjective clauses, and how to elaborate action with adverb clauses. This is a sentence from my narrative that I wrote three months ago, “Water-ski”: “Forgetting the cold temperature of Franklin Lake, I slid off the white dock fast, and I was in the water before Joanna knew it.” This sentence uses a participial phrase and a compound sentence to add detail. With these new methods I have been able to make my writing tighter and smoother while creating variety in my sentence structure.

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**FIGURE 2. Advanced Standards for Sentence Variety**


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Since we have learned so much about grammar and noticed such excellent sentence structure in the books we have read together, we ought to use that knowledge and awareness in our papers.

Compare the sentences in the following two paragraphs and discuss the differences:

Example 1: I walked calmly down the hallway. I was on the way to my locker. I had my backpack on my back. I balanced it by its straps. I turned down the long hall, and I saw balloons and streamers hanging on the wall. *Wow! Who decorated that locker?* I wondered. I walked closer, and I opened my eyes wider. *They've come to school early to surprise me on my birthday,* I realized. I felt light-hearted, and I smiled. Then I turned to find my friends.

Example 2: I walked calmly down the hallway on my way to my locker. Holding the straps of my backpack, I balanced the heavy load for the last few feet. As I turned down the long hall, I saw balloons and streamers hanging near my locker. *Wow! Who decorated that locker?* I wondered. I walked closer, my eyes widening as I neared my locker. *They've come to school early to surprise me,* I realized. Light-hearted and smiling, I turned to find my loyal friends.

Your assignment:

Vary the sentences in your narratives like the sentence models you see in Example 2. Read the list below and include the following elements in your narrative to be considered for an A or a B paper. Label revised sentence constructions in the margin of your final draft so that I can see where you believe you have made positive changes. *Carefully edit your drafts so that they reflect these elements:*

> Appositives: one appositive placed before a noun and one placed after a noun

Example: *A determined woman,* my teacher insisted on careful editing.  
My teacher, *a determined woman,* insisted on careful editing.

> Adjectives placed before a noun

Example: *Tall and muscular,* Joey stood waiting at the plate.  
*Soft and silky,* my cat lay quietly on the sunny windowsill.

> Absolute phrases used to communicate body language (3 for an A paper and 2 for a B paper)

Example: *Eyes widening in surprise,* I stared at the gift before me.  
*Fingers tightening around the hand grip,* I began to reel in the struggling fish.

> Participial phrases used to communicate body language

Example: *Bending my knees and gripping the bat,* I readied myself for the pitch.  
*Leaning my shoulder against the wooden door,* I tried to shove it open.  
*Turning toward my friend,* I whispered my plan into his ear.

> No more than three *be* verbs (A paper) or five *be* verbs (B paper)

Weak: Alex, Ben, and I *were* all on the same team, and we wanted something to do.

Stronger: Alex, Ben, and I, all on the same team, wanted something to do.

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Sarah, too, evaluated her work and her progress, saying:

I looked at some of my old papers and found them very unrealistic. I didn't elaborate any of the points and most of the stories were boring. [However, t]his example, "Lifting one of the bulky suitcases up above the ice, I arched my back and pushed the extra bulge of the suitcase in," shows specific

movements to further explain what is going on. Instead of saying I took the suitcases inside I used more detail to make it sound more realistic. When adding detail into writing, it helps the reader get into your story and want to continue reading.

Many students recognize the richness of the description when participial phrases and strong action verbs strengthen either the causal relationship

between sentences or the description within sentences. They know they have a palette to use in drawing images.

### Learning a Metalanguage

Sarah's and Caroline's abilities to analyze and name improvements in their revised sentences demonstrate that students have learned a vocabulary about language itself—a *metalanguage*. They begin to understand “the [grammatical] choices available to you and the effect those choices have on your reader” (Kolln, “Rhetorical” 2). I can communicate with them about their sentences. I can read first drafts and suggest, “Combine with an appositive” or “Use an adverb clause to suggest relationship” or “There's a problem with this participle.” If I had not used a monthly approach of teaching and labeling every new sentence variation so that students could put a name to the technique, we could not communicate in this way. Had I encouraged variation *only* through sentence combining or through imitation of professionally written sentences, students would probably have developed writing skill,

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but they would lack the metalanguage that is “handy—and necessary—in order to discuss what makes a sentence the way it is as the terms for science and mathematics are for talking about an experiment or a problem” (Haussamen 95). We, as teachers of writing, need not apologize for using a meaningful nomenclature. We've been stifled for too long by the accusation that we

cause “a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” by teaching formal grammar (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer 37–38); we should now begin again to recognize “grammar knowledge as a tool that enables the writer to make effective choices” (Kolln, *Rhetorical* 29).

### Learning through the Language of Literature

While providing practice in sentence combining and requiring sentence variation as part of student

writing contribute to writing growth, my colleagues and I see the greatest improvement in student writing when students encounter sentence variation in the literature they love reading. Whenever we read aloud passages in class, we note the beautifully written sentences. Our behavior says: Stop in the middle of this busy world and enjoy beautiful wording. Writers express themselves this way; you can, too.

*Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, for example, offers countless examples of fine writing. I might read, “Instantly the table was brilliant with light, and the cone of the shade threw its brightness straight downward, leaving the corners of the bunk house still in dusk” (38). Our students discuss word choice, action verbs, and participial phrases, all within the context of the rich language of the author. (Also see Carol McNally's description of work with *The Giver* in Weaver, McNally, and Moerman 26–27.)

Students discover other examples on their own. We ask them to write out sentences they have noticed and provide class time to discuss the “gems” they have written down, often having them share their choices in small groups. Mary Ehrenworth and Vicki Vinton encourage the “apprenticeship” of students to the professional writers they encounter in class, observing that “[w]hen we study the sentences and rhythms of powerful writers, we begin to notice the conscious choices they make, and we can try these in our own writing” (39). Students awed by the descriptive sentences of published authors want to reach the heights they see in print. They will experiment with sentence length and intentional fragments, and with use of internal dialogue and participial and absolute phrases to revise their drafts. We are teaching students tools such as appositives, participles, and absolutes “in the writing process as strategies for making clarity and meaning. And, ideally, both they and we need to see how grammar can be not just a corrective tool but an inspiring, transformative one” (17). Students are seduced into trying writing techniques they find in the work of professional writers.

When the teaching of grammar is viewed as a way to *enable* students to use their voices more effectively, to deliver their ideas and passions with greater impact, we can reinstate it as an important

## TWO-YEAR GRAMMAR PROGRAM

## Year One

September	Compound sentences
October	Adverb clauses
November	Review all material
December	Adjective clauses and appositives
January	Participial phrases
February through May	Practice using all variations in student writing

## Year Two

September	Review compound sentences
October	Review all introductory items (adverb clauses, participial phrases, interrupters, prepositional phrases)
November	Teach essential and nonessential elements (adjective clauses, appositives, participial phrases, interrupters)
December	Review earlier months
January through May	Reinforce concepts through writing and sentence-combining activities

means to an end. We see that teaching a simple, steady, practical grammar helps students transform from pedestrian writers to engaging writers who are proud of their expertise.

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