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# Sentence Construction: Supporting Elementary Students' Editing Skills

Zoi A. Traga Philippakos  
*University of Tennessee*, philippakos@gmail.com

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## **Introduction**

Writing is a multifaceted, literacy skill that poses several demands to writers (Graham, Harris, & Chambers, 2016; Hayes & Flower, 1980; McCutchen, 2010; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1983). On the one hand, at a cognitive level, writing requires learners to develop ideas, organize them, and compose a draft that responds to an assignment or goal and satisfies a specific writing purpose (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Hayes, 1996). Further, it requires the careful evaluation and revision of ideas across sentences, paragraphs, and pages to assure that the message is cohesive and attends to the writing purpose (Hayes, 2004). Finally, it requires writers' ability to express ideas in a manner that is in accordance to a specific language system and follows its expectations of grammatical and syntactic expression. On the other hand, writing is done to communicate (Prior, 2006); thus, writers need to determine early on in their work who the audience is in order to carefully consider the language and the syntactic complexity used to present ideas to readers (Hayes & Flower, 1980). Finally, at a metacognitive level, writers need to determine writing goals and constantly monitor progress toward those while they manage the completion of all tasks and while they manage their effort, time, and motivation (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007).

Overall, writing and writing clearly is not a simple task; It is a highly complex activity that requires the coordination of several processes and subprocesses for it to be effective and purposeful. Across those demands, syntax and the ability to express ideas with clarity can significantly affect a writer's ability to communicate (Berninger, Nagy, & Beers, 2011) and the

quality of their work (Crowhurst, 1983); thus, a writer may have knowledge about a topic but might not be able to compose clear sentences to share this message.

The purpose of this paper is to explain specific instructional practices that can be applied at the editing stage and support learners' editing skills and expression. In the following section the argument for syntactic control is made that supports stylistic choices and incorporates oral language. Then the specific expectations for grammatical knowledge by the developers of the Common Core State Standards are explained. Finally, the specific practices are shared within a comprehensive approach to writing that addresses genre (Philippakos & MacArthur, in press) and systematically teaches the writing process.

### **Grammar and Style: An Argument for Syntactic Control**

Sentence construction is not the same across writers. Writers have different styles and ways of expressing themselves (Strunk & White, 1979). These stylistic differences are due to the sentence structure that writers use, which is not independent of the task and purpose, but is unique to each writer. According to the college and career readiness standards and their guidelines for production and distribution of writing, students will, "*Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience* (CCSS, 2010, p.18). In this context, style and grammatical choices are dependent on the writing task, the genre, and the reader's expectations and even though this is a challenging goal, it is a necessary one for students to develop as learners. For students then to develop *voice*, instruction on syntactical variation and on genre-specific syntactic variations and choices should be provided.

It is imperative that instruction on sentence construction is systematic for students to develop the skill to write clearly and to have sentence variety for several reasons. The ability of a writer to fluently develop sentences without cognitive effort can leave space in working memory for planning and expression of ideas (Strong, 1985). Further, fluency in sentence construction can assist students as they integrate ideas from a graphic organizer to a draft without struggling to determine how to develop their sentences. Such syntactic fluency can help writers better communicate with readers and clearly explain their thinking and understanding of content. Lack of syntactic variation may also affect readers' engagement and interest in the material (Morris & Crump, 1982).

### **Application of Oral Language to Aid Sentence Construction Skills**

Sentence construction is cognitively challenging and linguistically demanding. Even though writing is not exact translation of speech in written language (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), the use of oral language can support students' writing quality as they may speak better than they write, and they may enhance their linguistic choices through collaborative interactions. Further, oral rehearsals (Myhill & Jones, 2009) can guide them in their sentence production. When students speak and practice specific sentence-construction tasks, they can hear themselves and judge if what they hear is clear for a listener prior to getting it in print for a reader. Therefore, it is suggested that the practices that are presented in the next section take place in language-rich environments that allow a wealth of oral interactions among learners, who practice and learn skills through social engagement and later internalize those in their own work (Bakhtin, 1986). In these contexts, students can rehearse their ideas and linguistic choices as they develop their sentences instead of working in silence (Philippakos, in press).

## Common Core State Standards: Expectations for Grammar

According to the Common Core State Standards' Initiative (CCSSI, 2010), students should work to achieve this level of syntactic control from as early as Kindergarten and progress in their knowledge of grammatical complexity as they move across their academic pathway. Specifically, the authors of the standards state that,

*“To build a foundation for college and career readiness in language, students must gain control over many conventions of standard English grammar, usage, and mechanics as well as learn other ways to use language to convey meaning effectively. They must also be able to determine or clarify the meaning of grade-appropriate words encountered through listening, reading, and media use; come to appreciate that words have nonliteral meanings, shadings of meaning, and relationships to other words; and expand their vocabulary in the course of studying content (CCSS, 2010, p. 25).*

The goal of instruction on grammar, usage, and mechanics is for students to be able to convey meaning effectively to readers. Therefore, instruction is not to emphasize grammar as a construct and a means to an end that teach parts of meaning that influence the writers' expression and communication and can be flexibly combined in sentences. In addition, the authors state that,

*The inclusion of Language standards in their own strand should not be taken as an indication that skills related to conventions, effective language use, and vocabulary are unimportant to reading, writing, speaking, and listening; indeed, they are inseparable from such contexts.” (CCSS, 2010, p. 25).*

In this context, and for the purposes of communication, these language standards should be addressed across the context of English Language Arts (ELA) instruction, disciplines, and learning contexts as students apply those skills in speaking, listening, reading, and writing (See Table 1).

Table 1

*Conventions of Standard English: Sentence-Construction Related Standards.*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.K.1.: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.	
Kindergarten	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.K.1.F: Produce and expand complete sentences in shared language activities.
Grade 1	CCS.ELA-LITERAY.L.1.1.J.: Produce and expand complete simple and compound declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory sentences in response to prompts.
Grade 2	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.K2.1.F.: Produce, expand, and rearrange complete simple and compound sentences (e.g., <i>The boy watched the movie; The little boy watched the movie; The action movie was watched by the little boy</i> ).
Grade 3	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.3.1.I.: Produce simple, compound, and complex sentences.
Grade 4	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.4.1.D.: Order adjectives within sentences according to conventional patterns (e.g., <i>a small red bag</i> rather than <i>a red small bag</i> ).

	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.4.1.F.: Produce complete sentences, recognizing and correcting inappropriate fragments and run-ons.
Grade 5	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L5.3.A.: Expand, combine, and reduce sentences for meaning, reader/listener interest, and style.

Based on these standards (CCSS, 2010), from as early as kindergarten, students engage in sentence expansion skills during shared language tasks. The emphasis is on students’ development of the alphabetic principle; however, through shared language activities, they can practice sentence development and sentence expansion. Orally, students can also imitate sentences or use sentence frames to express their ideas (Traga Philippakos, in press; Traga Philippakos, MacArthur, & Munsel, 2018).

By grade 1, students respond to questions about readings (or on other topics) and apply different types of simple and compound sentences. Now, the challenge for them is how to connect those simple compound sentences; thus, students learn the basic principles of combining sentences. In grade 2 students produce, expand, and flexibly rearrange sentences to best express ideas. Stylistic differences are encouraged at this level as there are many different ways to express an idea in a sentence and better convey its meaning. In grade 4 and grade 5 students further develop their editing skills and their sentence-construction skills to tend to readers’ needs.

**How to Apply this Work in The Classroom**

In the following section it is suggested that instruction on specific editing skills is completed at the editing stage and that students are provided with opportunities to apply the taught skills in their own writing after teacher modeling and collaborative practice.

In the Developing Strategic Writers work (Philippakos & MacArthur, in press; Philippakos, MacArthur & Coker, 2015), the Strategy for Teaching Strategies (STS) is the blueprint for instruction as well as for the development of additional genre-based lessons. STS draws from strategy instruction principles (Graham, 2006), from self-regulation and the self-regulated strategy development model (SRSD; Harris & Graham, 2009), from instruction on text structure that guides planning and revision (Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, & Stevens 1991), from genre-knowledge (Martin & Rose, 2012), from research on reading and writing connections (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991), on evaluation and use of genre-specific evaluation criteria (Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016a,b), and on views genre as a text-structure, syntactic, and linguistic construct (McCutchen, 2012).

Thus, genre-based instruction addresses both text structure, syntax, and linguistic aspects of a genre. It should be noted that in this approach instruction on syntax takes place at the editing stage and genre- syntactic needs are addressed then. In the meantime, students have been exposed to genre-specific texts and have identified (with teacher support, collaboratively, and independently) sentence structures and specific sentence frames or vocabulary for that genre and have been supported in their written expression through the use of genre-specific sentence frames. The instructional sequence in the STS is as follows:

1. **Introduction to the writing purposes.** Teachers introduce the writing purposes (Persuade, Inform, Entertain, or Convey an Experience; PIECE of pie; Philippakos, 2018) as a pie and comment on the various genres within each piece of that pie. Finally, they introduce the genre that will be the focus of instruction.
2. **Introduction of genre via read-alouds.** Teachers introduce the genre and discuss its purpose and importance in school and in life. Further, the organizational elements,

relevant vocabulary, and syntax are explained (e.g., sentence frames). Teachers complete a read aloud that represents that genre and take notes using the elements of the genre as a guide (Philippakos, 2017). For example, as the teacher reads a story, she comments and takes notes on the Beginning elements: Characters, time, place, problem; Middle elements: Events and complications; and End elements: Solution, Emotions. At the end of the read aloud, they summarize the read aloud using the elements as a guide.

3. **Evaluation of good and weak examples.** Teachers apply genre-specific evaluation criteria using a rubric to assign a score of zero (not there), one (present but not clear), or 2 (excellent) to model evaluation of a good and a weak example. Collaboratively, they practice evaluation, and students eventually evaluate their own work and set goals.
4. **Think-aloud modeling.** Teachers model how to plan, draft, evaluate to revise, and edit a paper. They think aloud and explain both how to use the writing strategies for that genre but also how to problem solve and stay motivated and focused. For example, teachers may cross out the tasks they have completed, ask themselves what the next step would be, and comment on their ability to complete challenging task without getting overwhelmed because they use their strategies and monitor their work.
5. **A focus on Self-regulation and a mini-lesson.** Teacher explain how they overcame cognitive challenges and with students develop statements that would function as self-talk and could be used by students to keep them focused and engaged. Teachers also model and collaboratively practice with students a mini-lesson that is specific to the genre (e.g., use of adjectives in story writing).

6. **Collaborative practice.** Teachers and students work together to complete a paper using the taught strategies. Teachers are scribes and ask students to explain the strategies and apply them with their support.
7. **Guided practice.** Students begin their work and teachers support them through differentiation groups and individual conferences.
8. **Preparation for peer review, self-evaluation, and peer review.** Teachers model how to evaluate a weak paper (written by an unknown student), and how to give feedback. Students practice evaluation of papers written by unknown writers, they self-evaluate their paper and then work with partners.
9. **Editing.** At this stage, students reread their work and examine it for Spelling, Capitalization, Indentation, Punctuation, and Sentences (SCIPS). If a specific grammatical issue is prominent on students' papers, the teacher will model it, collaboratively apply it with students, and then ask students to return to their papers and address it. The specific issue that was identified becomes part of the classroom's editing goals and students include it in their list of editing goals. As teachers conference with students, they reinforce the specific editing goal and support students who may need additional practice.
10. **Continuous practice to mastery and independence.** Students continue to write in response to a new topic and set goals for improvement.

### **Supporting Sentence-Construction Skills During Editing With SCIPS**

Unfortunately, traditional-grammar instruction does not result to improvements on students' writing quality (Hudson, 2016). Even though students may work on worksheets and complete information on parts of speech or answer questions about parts of speech, they are not

able to transfer this knowledge in their own writing when they are asked to independently compose. When using SCIPS (Philippakos & MacArthur, in press; Philippakos, MacArthur, and Coker, 2015) and the focus is on sentences and their correction/development, some evidence-based practices can be considered.

The authors of the What Works Clearinghouse writing-practice guide include in their recommendations the need for elementary students to learn how to construct sentences for fluency, meaning, and style (Graham, Bollinger, et al., 2012). To achieve this, students can engage in sentence construction activities that include the use of sentence frames, sentence-expansion for sentence construction, sentence expansion activities for sentence elaboration, sentence combining, sentence deconstruction, and reconstruction.

**Sentence frames.** The use of sentence frames can support students in their speaking and writing and can also help them develop a needed lexicon for syntactic patterns that may be specific to a genre (e.g., One reason to support the claim that \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_). Instruction on the use of sentence frames can begin early on in students' schooling and can be supported through conversations during read alouds and during collaborative writing. In a study conducted by Philippakos, MacArthur, & Munsel, (2018), students engaged with their teacher in collaborative argumentation during a read aloud. The task was part of a program that combined collaborative reasoning with cognitive strategy instruction (Philippakos & MacArthur, under review).

Teachers functioned as facilitators and as peers in this argumentative process; however, they also scaffolded and supported students to orally use their sentence frames to frame their argument and respond to a peer or to the character of their read-aloud book. In this same program (Philippakos & MacArthur, in press; Philippakos, MacArthur, & Coker, 2015), across several other genres (e.g., compare-contrast, story, procedural), sentence frames are used when the teacher models

how to plan, draft, evaluate to revise, and edit a paper (See Table 2), and they are specific to a genre. Teachers support students in the application of sentence frames during collaborative writing and during guided practice.

Table 2

*Sample Sentence Frames by Genre*

Opinion writing: Statement of Opinion	<p>One reason I think that ____ is that ____.</p> <p>I strongly support the belief that ____.</p> <p>It is my belief that ____.</p> <p>From my perspective, ____.</p>
Opinion writing: Reasons	<p>One reason I think that ____ is that ____.</p> <p>One reason to support the claim that ____ is that ____.</p> <p>One of the most important reasons to consider regarding ____ is that ____.</p>
Procedural writing: Statement of purpose	<p>It is important to learn about ____ in order to ____.</p> <p>It is imperative that ____ know how to ____ so they can ____.</p>
Steps and explanations	<p>First, _____. It is important that ____ so _____.</p> <p>The next step is to _____. If _____ then _____.</p> <p>Possibly, _____.</p> <p>Then _____ . Etc.</p>
<p>© Philippakos Z. A., &amp; MacArthur, C.A. (in press). Developing strategic young writers through genre instruction: Resources for Grades K - 2. Modified with permission from Guilford press.</p>	

Graham, Bollinger et al. (2012), share that the application of the sentence frames should begin with teacher modeling, students' application and sharing with peers, and gradual withdrawal of support systems for students to use them without any reminders.

**Sentence expansion for sentence construction.** It is not uncommon for young learners to respond using a one-phrase response when they answer a question. In this case, it is helpful to guide students in the development of a sentence by using meaningful questions. These questions can refer to *who, when, where, how, why*, and support the development of a sentence.

Figure 1 includes an excerpt where this practice is further explained with a real, classroom example. After reading the book by Mo Willems, *Don't let the Pigeon drive the bus*, students are asked why they think that Pigeon should not drive the bus. One of the first-grade students responds *wreck it*. This is an excellent opportunity to support sentence expansion and connect it with sentence frames for oral practice.

Figure 1

*Classroom Example for Sentence Expansion Combined with the Use of Sentence Frames.*

*Teacher:* Who wreck it

*Student:* Pigeon.

*Teacher:* Pigeon will wreck it. What will Pigeon wreck?

*Student.* Pigeon will wreck the bus.

*Teacher:* Great. It is great that you answered in a way that helped me clearly understand as a listener! Do you think that Pigeon should drive the bus? Let's use our sentence frame that says, "I think that \_\_\_\_" and tell us what you think.

*Student:* I think that Pigeon shouldn't drive it.

Teacher: Well said. What reason do you have to support your claim that Pigeon should not drive the bus?

Student: Pigeon will wreck the bus.

Teacher: Let's use one of the reason sentence frames that says, "One reason I think that Pigeon should not... could you continue?"

Student: One reason I think that Pigeon should not drive the bus is that it will wreck it.

The same practice can take place after the completion of a reading as students work to provide the main ideas from the text (See Figure 2).

Figure 2

*Sentence Expansion After Reading the Book Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus by Mo Willems*

Pigeon (what)

Pigeon wanted to drive the bus. (why)

Pigeon wanted to drive the bus because it was fun.

Finally, the same principles could be used when students are asked to provide a response to a question about their experiences. Teaching students to ask meaningful questions can support them to expand their sentences and provide a clear meaning for listeners and readers. Once students complete their sentence, they can consider other ways to express the same ideas and provide stylistic variations in their work.

Figure 2

*Sentence Expansion for journal writing*

My friend and I (what)

My friend and I went to the movies (when)

My friend and I went to the movies in the weekend (why)

My friend and I went to the movies in the weekend to watch *The Grinch*.

Alternatively, students could say,

In the weekend, my friend and I went to the movies and watched *The Grinch*.

***Sentence expansion for sentence elaboration.*** Once students have developed a simple sentence, they can be supported to expand it by adding relevant parts of speech that are the instructional focus. Table 3 provides an example with a focus on adjectives (Table 3; Philippakos & MacArthur, in press). The instructional sequence will involve a gradual release of responsibility with the teacher modeling the task, students practicing in groups, sharing it with partners and discussing their choices (Graham, Bollinger et al., 2012).

Table 3

*Sentence Expansion with A Focus on Adjectives*

I have a cat.

I have a white cat.

I have a cute, tiny, white cat.

**Sentence combining.** Sentence combining is an approach that supports the construction of complex and compound sentences (Saddler, Behforooz, & Asaro, 2008; Saddler & Graham, 2005). Often, as students try to provide more complex ideas in their sentences, they produce run-ons. Sentence combining can help students see how to connect simple sentences to provide complex sentences (Strong, 1976; 1985). As an approach it can support students' understanding that they have stylistic choices when they write, and that their sentences and the way they

develop them carry meaning that supports readers' understanding. Table 4 presents such an example.

Table 4

*Sample of Sentence Combining*

<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. My stomach hurts.</li><li>2. I had a lot of chocolate after dinner.</li><li>3. I had a lot of sweets after dinner.</li></ol> <p>Combined</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- My stomach hurts because I had a lot of chocolate and sweets after dinner.</li><li>- Because I had a lot of chocolate and sweets after dinner, my stomach hurts.</li></ul>
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This process of sentence combining with possible sentence deconstruction (breaking a long sentence into smaller sentences for recombining; Philippakos & MacArthur, in press) could also support students' comprehension (Graham & Hebert, 2011).

### **Discussion**

Grammar can affect the clarity of a written message and can affect readers' meaning making (Hayes & Flower, 1980; Hudson, 2016). Thus, it is important that it is instructionally addressed in students' classrooms. However, instruction using worksheets and review materials may support students' knowledge of those but will not transfer in their writing and will not improve the quality of their work (Hudson, 2016). Even though additional research is needed in the area of grammatical accuracy and for ways to support students' syntax and sentence fluency, the use of sentence frames, sentence combining, and sentence expansion practices can be used (Graham, Bollinger et al., 2012). Pedagogically, a gradual release of responsibility is needed for

students to be able to develop comfort and skill to complete a taught practice independently. Thus, they need to observe teachers during their modeling with think aloud as they combine sentences to understand the logic of the task. They then need to practice the task with peers and discuss their work and choices, and finally return to their own work to make editing changes. Across these practices oral practice supports students' development of background and language skills they can gradually internalize and apply in their own work. Further, instruction on grammar and syntax needs to be contextualized. Therefore, if instruction on grammar takes place at the editing stage (as with the use of SCIPS at the Developing Strategic Writers approach; Philippakos & MacArthur, in press), students can return to their papers and apply this new editing skill/goal and also be supported by their teachers during conferences and small-group meetings. Finally, a focus on genre and on specific syntactic needs can support students' development of syntactic choices for a specific genre that can later lead to variation in written expression. Not all genres have the same syntactic structure. Addressing knowledge about syntax within the context of genre learning can support both students' expression and deeper understanding about a genre. And this is a knowledge that can serve students both when they write, as they will be expressing themselves accurately and clearly, and when they read, as they will be better able to understand the content of sentences and paragraphs and the intended meaning of authors. For students' college and career readiness and for their preparation for their workplace and the social world, classroom instruction should address clarity of expression and syntactic accuracy early in students' schooling connecting reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

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