## Teaching <br> Sentence Structure to <br> Primary Writers



## Sentence Structure

Incomplete sentences, missed periods or capitals, and a lack of varied sentence starters are a source of endless frustration in the writing process. How many children and teachers are tired of writing/reading stories in which most sentences begin with: "Then he.... So then... But then.... The man.... He... She.... Because...."? Why is it children write this way? How can it be transformed?

The first reason many children struggle with writing incomplete sentences, missing periods or capital letters is that concrete explanations on the abstract concept of subject and predicate are difficult to give. Teaching in this area must be simple enough for young children to grasp, explain, and apply. Most children are able to verbalize that a sentence can be made using: a person/noun plus a verb/action word, a thing/noun plus a verb/action word, or a place/noun plus a verb/action word. Therefore, they can write a simple sentence correctly placing the capitals and periods in a sentence which reads "The clown juggled.", because the example contained only the noun and verb. Should the sentence read "The clown juggled balls down the street." the bulk of the class is at a loss to explain why the period comes after the word "street" and not after the word "juggled". To understand why the period comes after the words "balls down the street" instead of "juggled" requires a grasp of predicate.

Concrete teaching on predicate can be accomplished using the question words: who, what, why, where, when and how. The question words are used to vary sentence beginnings and change sentence structure. Through oral discussion and written modelling a solid grasp of sentence structure can be laid. Application exercises reinforce the concepts until mastery is achieved.

# Step One: Oral Discussion 

Materials: Poster/Overhead Transparency of Diagram, pictures of people

## Concept One: Person plus an Action with a word ending

Teacher: When speaking, people use groups of words which form ideas that make sense. Each group of words which forms an idea is called a sentence. One way to make a sentence is to join a person plus an action together. Who is in this picture? Class: A baseball pitcher.
Teacher: Good. The person in a sentence can be called a noun. Now, who can show me through drama an action a pitcher might do? The action is called a verb in English. What word(s) would be used to describe the action you did?
Class: toss, whip, throw
Teacher: Excellent. Now, if we join the person with one of those actions it might sound like this: The pitcher toss. Does that make sense or sound right to you? Class: No.
Teacher: That's because it needs a word ending. Look at the word ending box. We might say: The pitcher tossed or The pitcher tosses.


## Concept Two: Helping Verbs

Teacher: If we choose the ending "ing" the sentence would say: The pitcher tossing. Now it's your turn. Say "The pitcher tossing." out loud. Does it sound like a proper way of speaking? another way to phrase the question would be to ask students: Does that sentence sound correct/right to you?
Class: No.
Teacher: That's because the action word needs help. Some action words/verbs are helpers. Let's look at the Helping Verbs box. At times the action word we choose needs a helping verb in order for the sentence to make sense. If we choose "ing" as the word ending we will need a helping verb. Let's read the helping verbs together. Which one could we use to help our "ing" verb?
Class: We could use the helping verb "is" or "was".
Teacher: Very good. This would make our sentence say either:

1. The pitcher is tossing.
or
2. The pitcher was tossing.


## Concept Three: Person plus an Action with Question Word Phrases at the End

Teacher: You can form a longer, more interesting sentence by adding a question word phrase onto the end of your action word. To find out what a question word phrase is, let's look at the question word box. The words we use to ask questions are: who, what, where, when, why, and how. To find out how the question words work in sentences, I'm going to ask you a question about our sentence using one of them.
Teacher: The pitcher tossed what?
Class: the ball.
Teacher: Excellent. Now our sentence says "The pitcher tossed the ball." You have just learned that a sentence can be made using a person plus an action with a word ending and a what (answer to this question word). Let's try adding on second question word phrase.
The pitcher tossed the ball to who(m)?
Class: the catcher.
Teacher: Well done. Now our sentence says "The pitcher tossed (what) the ball (who) to the catcher." You have just learned that a sentence can be made using a person plus an action with a word ending and the two question word answers of what and who.


## Defining Question Words

```
*Suddenly
*At that moment
*In a flash
*In an instant
*In a split second
*All of a sudden
*Instantly
*All at once
*In a twinkle
*Not a second too soon
```


## Other "When" Words

```
*times of day (morning, afternoon, evening, night)
*seasons (spring, summer, autumn, winter)
*time periods (once upon a time, many years ago, long ago, centuries ago, last week)
```


## Exciting "When" Words

$\square$

## "How" Words

*ly words (example: quickly)
*ing words (example: soaring) which start a sentence

| "What" Words |  |  |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
| *colour (purple) | *number (three) | *shape (coiled) |
| *size (tiny) | *age (young) | *type (wooden) |

## "Who" Words

*titles (Mr. Mrs. Miss Dr.)
*descriptions of noun (Sam, the little old man,)

## "Where" Words (Prepositions)

around, above, behind, beneath, below, behind, beside, between, deep, down, downwards, in, into, inside, on, onto, through, to, toward, upon, under, underneath

## Concept Four: Thing Plus an Action with a Word Ending and Question Word(s)

Teacher: A second way to make a sentence is to join a thing plus an action together. What is in this picture?
Class: A stegosaurus.
Teacher: Good. A stegosaurus is a thing. The thing in a sentence is also called a noun.
Now, who can show me through drama an action a stegosaurus might do? Remember the action is called a verb. What word(s) would be used to describe the action you did?
Class: lumber, stomp, clomp
Teacher: Excellent. Now, if we join the thing with one of those actions it might sound like this: The stegosaurus lumber. Does that make sense or sound right to you? Class: No.
Teacher: Why not?
Class: We need to add a word ending.
Teacher: Great remembering! Which one(s)?
Class: How about "ed" or "s"?


Teacher: Both will work. Who can tell me what the sentence says with a word ending? Class: The sentence might say:

1. The stegosaurus lumbered.
or
2. The stegosaurus lumbers.

Teacher: Wow! You've got it! If you were to add the "ing" word ending, what else would you need to add in the sentence?
Class: We would need to add a helping verb. We could use "is" or "was".
Teacher: Exactly. What sentences could you make?
Class: We could make:

1. The stegosaurus is lumbering.
or
2. The stegosaurus was lumbering.

Teacher: Great job! Now, who can take this sentence and add one/two question word phrase(s). Remember the question word phrases are based on the answers to: who, what, where, when, why, and how.
Class: If we use where and why we can make the sentence: The stegosaurus was lumbering (where) in the field (why) to find some food.


## Concept Five: Place Plus an Action with a Word Ending and Question Word(s)

Teacher: A third way to make a sentence is to join a place plus an action together. What is in this picture?
Class: A castle.
Teacher: Good. A castle is a place. The place in a sentence can also be the noun. Now, who can show me through drama an action a castle might do? Remember the action is called a verb. What word(s) would be used to describe the action you did?
Class: tower, rose, stretch
Teacher: Excellent. Now, if we join the place with one of those actions and a word ending it might sound like this:

1. The castle towered. or 2. The castle towers.


Helping Verbs
is, am, are, was, were, has, had, have, do, does, did, shall, will, should, would, could, may, might, must, can

Concept Six: Noun, Helping Verb \& a Question Word
Teacher: When writing sentences about people, things or places some-

times a helping verb is used alone. This occurs when it is followed by a "what" question word.
For example:

1. The girl was beautiful. person + helping verb + what
2. The dog is enormous.
thing + helping verb + what
3. The castle was shiny. place + helping verb + what

## Student Writing Samples



# Concept Seven: How to Vary Sentences by Placing the Question Words At the Beginning 

Teacher: Let's say we wrote the sentence "The clown danced down the sidewalk." We have used a person + action + word ending + where. Another thing we can do is add a question word at the beginning of the sentence. Let's start with the question word "what".

1. What kind of clown danced down the sidewalk?

The funny clown danced down the sidewalk.
What (funny) + Person + Action + Word Ending + Where (down the sidewalk)
2. When did the clown dance?

One morning the funny clown danced down the sidewalk.
When (morning) + What (funny) + Person + Action + Word Ending + Where (down the sidewalk)
3. Why did the clown dance?

For fun one morning, the clown danced down the sidewalk.
Why (for fun) + When (one morning) + Person + Action + Word Ending + Where
4. How did the clown dance?

Wiggling his arms, the clown danced down the sidewalk.
How (wiggling) + What (his arms) + Person + Action + Word Ending + Where


## Using the Question Words as Sentence Starters:

## 1. "What" Words

Plural Nouns (Stars dotted the sky.)
Number words (Six men stood still.)
Size words (Large hills rose into the sky.)
Shape words (Round tables filled the tent.)
Age ( Young men lined up for miles.)
Colour words (Purple flowers poked their noses up through the grass.)
Description words (Dainty lace flowed from the collar of the dress.)
2. "When" Words
*Suddenly
*Instantly
*In a twinkle
*Later on
*A short time later
*All of a sudden
*Soon
*Just then
*Not too long
*Next
*At that moment
*All at once
*In a flash/twinkle
*In a while
*In a few minutes
*Times of Day (morning, afternoon, evening, night)
*Seasons (spring, summer, autumn, winter)
*Time Periods (once upon a time, many years ago, long ago, centuries ago, last week)

## 3. "How" Words

*ly words (example: Quickly, the boy snatched up his ball.)
*ing words (example: Soaring, the plane flew into the sky.)
4. "Where" Words
around, above, behind, beneath, below, beside, between, deep, downwards, down, in, inside, into, on, onto, over, passed, through, to, toward, upon, under,
5. "Who" Words
*Titles (Mr. Mrs. Miss Dr.)
*Descriptions of characters
Example One: The little old man limped along.
Example Two: The furry creature bounded up to my nose.
*Names of characters (Herbert, the horse, flicked his tail.)
*Pronouns (I, it, he, her, him, me, my, she, them, they, we)

## Paragraphs with Sentence Starter Practice

Name

## 1. "What" Words

*Plural Nouns<br>*Shape Words<br>*Number Words<br>*Colour Words<br>*Size Words *Age *Description Words

$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$

## 2. "When" Words

*Suddenly
*Instantly
*In a twinkle
*Later on
*A short time later
*All of a sudden
*Soon
*Just then
*Not too long
*Next
*At that moment
*All at once
*In a flash
*In a while
*In a few minutes
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
3. "How" Words
*ly words
*ing words
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$

## 4. "Where" Words

around, above, behind, beneath, below, beside, between, downwards, down, in, inside, into, on, onto, over, through, to, toward, upon, under
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$

## 5. "Who" Words

*Titles (Mr. Mrs., Miss, Dr. Rev.)
*Description of characters
Example one: The little old man limped along.
Example Two: The furry creature bounded up to my nose.
*Names of characters (Herbert, the horse, flicked his tail.)
*Pronouns (I, it, he, her, him, me, my, she, them, they, we)
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$
$\qquad$


## Student Example \# 1



## 4. "Where" Words

around, above, behind, beneath, below beside, between, downwards, down, in, inside, into, on, onto, over, through, to, toward, upon, under

5. "Who" Words
*Titles (Mr Mrs., Miss, Dr. Rev.)
*Description of characters
Example one: The little old man limped along.
Example Two: The furry creature bounded up to my nose.
*Names of characters (Herbert, the horse, flicked his tail.)
*Pronouns (I, it, he, her, him, me, my, she, them, they, we)

of hony.


## Other Variations on Sentence Starters \#1 and \#3

## Sentence 1: "What" Sentence Starters

Number Words: Six bees slurped up the nectar.
Size Words: Tiny bees slurped up the nectar.
Age: Young bees slurped up the nectar.
Shape Words: Fuzzy bees slurped up the nectar
Colour Words: Golden bees slurped up the nectar.
Description Words: Hungry bees slurped up the nectar.

## Sentence 3: "How" Sentence Starters <br> "ing" Words: Settling down for a nap, the bees were quiet.

## Student Example \# 2



## 4. "Where" Words

around, above, behind beneath, below, beside, between, downwards, down, in, inside, into, on, onto, over, through, to, toward, upon, under


## 5. "Who" Words

*Titles (Mr. Mrs., Miss, Dr. Rev.)
*Description of characters
Example one: The little old man limped along.
Example Two: The furry creature bounded up to my nose.
*Names of characters (Herbert, the horse, flicked his tail.)
*Pronouns)(I, it,he) her, him, me, my, she, them, they, we)


Other Variations on Sentence Starters \#1 and \#3

## Sentence 1: "What" Sentence Starters

Plural Nouns: Trap door spiders hide in their dens.
Number Words: Three trap door spiders hid in their dens.
Size Words: Small trap door spiders hid in their dens.
Age: Old trap door spiders hide in their dens.
Shape Words: Skinny trap door spiders hide in their dens.
Colour Words: Brown trap door spiders hide in their dens.

## Sentence 3: "How" Sentence Starters <br> "ly" Words: Tightly clutching, the worm, he scrambles back inside.

* To teach prepositions, play the game "Simon Says" using buttons and cups to teach prepositions.


## Sentences Starting with "Where"

Teacher: If the sentence begins with the question word "where", the order of the noun and verb can be reversed.
5. Where was the mouse?

Example: Deep in the haystack was a mouse.
Where (deep in the haystack) + Helping Verb (was) + Thing
Teacher: Notice how the verb came before the noun in the sentence above.

Teacher: When starting a sentence with the question word "where" a second question word "what" may be added BEFORE the person/thing.
6. Where was the mouse and what kind of mouse was it?

Example: Deep in the haystack was a little mouse.
Where (down the sidewalk) + Helping Verb + What (little) + Thing


## Concept Eight: Exciting Sentence Starters \& Glue Words

Teacher: In stories, authors use exciting "when" words to start sentences in order to catch the reader's attention. These are shown in the diagram above. An example of a sentence using an exciting "when" word at the beginning might be: Suddenly a dog leaped out of the crowd!
Note: "Once upon a time" is a traditional "when" beginning used to start stories. Teacher: Glue words are used to join two sentences together. Only two sentences may be joined before a period must be used. Glue words can also be used to join one sentence together along with a second action and its question word phrases. Glue words are called conjunctions in grammar. In story writing we mainly use the glue words "and, as, while, because". There are many other conjunctions, but they will not be introduced at this time. Note: introduce more conjunctions as context dictates.

1. An example of using a glue word to join two sentences together is:

Suddenly a dog leaped out of the crowd and then it licked the clown! when (suddenly) + thing + action + word ending + where + glue word (and) + when (then) + thing (it) + action + word ending + who (the clown).
2. An example of using a glue word to join one sentence with a second action is: At that moment a dog leaped out of the crowd and landed on the clown's shoulder! when + thing + action + where + glue word + second action + where


## Concept Nine: Using Question Word Phrases Between the Noun and Verb

Teacher: Question word phrases (who, what, where, when, why, how) can be inserted at the beginning, end, and middle of sentences.
Example 1:
The juggler at the circus tumbled across the field.
Noun + Where (at the circus) + Verb + Where (across the field)
Example 2:
Harry, a veterinarian, examined the small puppy.
Noun + Who (veterinarian) + Verb + What (small puppy)

## Concept Ten: Using Plural Nouns and "ing" Sentence Starters in Stories

Teacher: In stories, authors try to begin sentences with different words. This is a challenge. It is tempting to begin sentences using only the following words: name of the character, he/she, they, then, the, so, because, but. Starting sentences with different words can be accomplished using two basic tools.

Tool one: Sentences can be started with plural nouns by omitting "the".
Example 1: The seals slapped their paws together.
Change to: Seals slapped their paws together.
Plural noun (seals) + Verb (slapped) + What (their paws) + How (together).
Example 2: The clouds drifted over the barn.
Change to: Clouds drifted over the barn.
Plural noun (clouds) + Verb + Where (over the barn)
Tool two: Sentences can be starting with "ing" words (participles).
Example 1: Swinging, the monkey leaped from branch to branch.
How (swinging) + Thing + Verb + Where (from branch to branch)
Combining these two strategies in writing:
Clouds drifted over the barn. Strutting up and down the fence, a rooster crowed noisily.

## Concept 11: How Students can Achieve these Strategies:

## 1. Creating Word Webs of Nouns and Verbs

Word webs of nouns and verbs give children lists of plural nouns to start sentences with. Matching verbs can be selected and used to form sentences. Most verbs can be turned into "ing" words. Once they become an "ing" word, they can be used to start sentences with. Here is an example of a word web:

| Setting Word Web for a Farm |  |
| :--- | :--- |
| Nouns | Verbs |
| clouds <br> sunlight <br> wind <br> grain | drifted, floated, sailed <br> blazed, beamed, scorched, shone <br> ducks <br> whispered, whistled, rustled <br> kittens <br> barn |
| wadd, stretched, danced <br> padled, bobbed, dove, splashed <br> licked, yawned, snuggled, scratched <br> rose, stood, towered |  |

Word webs give children visual, concrete choices. They can actually choose a plural noun to start their sentence with by circling it. Then, they can choose and combine a matching verb. For a different kind of sentence starter, students can circle a verb from the word web and turn it into an "ing" word to use at the beginning of their next sentence. Next, they can circle the matching noun and follow it up with a verb and question word phrase. When these two skills (plural nouns and "ing" words) are combined with using the question word phrases of "what, where, when, why, how" it becomes much easier to vary sentence starters. The difficulty in story writing is that most children don't have a solid grasp of sentence structure and they don't have word webs to work from.

Word webs contain nouns and verbs which are the building blocks for creating simple sentences. For early or weak writers these nouns and verbs serve as a base for creating sentences. Simultaneously, they can act as a springboard to stimulate vocabulary for strong writers who can be encouraged to use the web as a starting point for stretching their vocabulary.

The process of how to create contextually useful word webs with students is addressed in any of the story writing projects.

Sunlight beamed down on the old farm. Ducks paddled and bobbed in the pond as the wind whispered through the tall grass. Over the meadow and down a hill, stood the old barn. Yawning and licking their paws, two small kittens snuggled deep inside.

