

Getting Started with Elementary School Sentence Composing

A Student Worktext

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*To Tobey Antao, our constant editor, for her sight:
foresight, hindsight, oversight, insight—all with 20/20 vision.*

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THE SENTENCE-COMPOSING APPROACH

Nothing is more satisfying than to write a good sentence.

—Barbara Tuchman, historian

LEARNING BY IMITATING

STARTING SENTENCE IMITATING

“Show me how.” You’ve probably asked somebody to show you how to do something: swing a bat, fix your hair, tie a tie, ride a bike, make a grilled cheese sandwich, solve a math problem—how to do just about anything.

Imitating those who know how to do something is a good way to learn. Throughout this worktext, you’ll see how authors build their sentences, imitate how they do it, and then build your sentences in a similar way.

First, look at an example of sentence imitating. Below is a model sentence followed by three sentences that imitate the way the model sentence is built. All four sentences—the model and the three imitations—mean something different and use different words, but they all have the same kinds of sentence parts. In other words, the imitations are built like the model.

EXAMPLE

Model Sentence:

On my first day of sixth grade, I was completely and totally giddy.

—Paige Rawl, *Positive: A Memoir*

Imitation Sentences:

1. On the last day before the holiday, Jane was certainly and happily excited.
2. On the last day of the year, the students were finally and thankfully finished.
3. For the opening day of her vacation, she was thoroughly and cheerfully ready.

ACTIVITY 1: FINDING THE IMITATION SENTENCE

Directions: Below each model sentence are two nonsense sentences. Which one imitates how the model sentence is built?

Note: The nonsense sentences use made-up words or they use familiar words in silly ways. Why? Well, first, it’s fun! There’s also another reason: using nonsense sentences will help you to focus on the structure of the sentence, not on the particular words in the sentence.

EXAMPLE

Model Sentence: This is a snail shell, round, firm, and glossy as a horse chestnut.

—Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Gift from the Sea*

- a. There was a kran boop, squik, burd, and zilly as a boot boolock.
- b. Stamping the boomer, singing a cappy, the car kadoodled up the gazant.

Imitation Sentences: a—Sentence parts are built the same way as the model sentence.

| | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| This is a snail shell, | There was a kran boop, |
| round, | squik, |
| firm, | burd, |
| and glossy | and zilly |
| as a horse chestnut. | as a boot booglock. |

1. **Model Sentence:** We ran to our bikes, my stomach churning with something like excitement.

—John Green, *Paper Towns*

- a. Zula climbed up the kazoo, its snolleer pitching with someone like banana.
- b. When the permoota hit the babament, a turvy scooped up the flint and doop.

2. **Model Sentence:** A large woman came out from the back room, her hair in a frazzled bun.

—Clare Vanderpool, *Moon Over Manifest*

- a. The red jelly strolled down with the green dot, its mango with a ginger tooth.
- b. Anthro, a scinty scooter with a big nostra, circled the round square.

3. **Model Sentence:** The thunder and lightning were frightening, while the rain came in gusts and torrents.

—J. A. Swisher, “Kate Shelley,” *The Palimpsest*

- a. Along the gord, with bright dirt, the grooda whirled, its hair flying off.
- b. This stoodo and poodo were contenting, when the pretzel danced in fits and turns.

4. **Model Sentence:** Until a few months ago, I was a boarding student at Yancy Academy, a private school for troubled kids.

—Rick Riordan, *The Lightning Thief*

- a. After a few stoopoids then, he was a crimpet with Monster Mash, a fun fest for speckled droods.
- b. Its brown and yellow poondle, covered in candy, jumped the dooby bush with its putter.

5. **Model Sentence:** Anne Frank, who was thirteen when she began her diary and fifteen when she was forced to stop, wrote about her likes and dislikes.

—Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler (editors),
The Diary of Anne Frank

- a. The bloomersnap by the butoner, covered in candles, hopped happily through the polka dot grass toward the amazing tooderman.
- b. Vander Bean, which was oily when it started its cloud and dry when it was asked to froog, jumped outside its fronts and backs.

ACTIVITY 2: CHUNKING SENTENCES

Directions: The sentence parts of the model sentence are divided into chunks (sentence parts) with a slash mark (/). Which one of the two sentences underneath the model sentence can be chunked the same way because it imitates how the model sentence is built?

EXAMPLE

Model Sentence: I / drifted to sleep, / thinking about my cousins, / and missing them, / hoping they were missing me.

—Kelly Yang, *Front Desk*

- a. Painting the second coat on my bedroom walls, the same color blue, made the room feel so new and so pretty.
- b. Ashlee started to dance, jumping around the floor, and circling it, knowing her parents were watching her.

Imitation Sentences: b—Sentence parts match.

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| I / | Ashlee / |
| drifted to sleep, / | started to dance, / |
| thinking about my cousins, / | jumping around the floor, / |
| and missing them, / | and circling it, / |
| hoping they were missing me. | knowing her parents were watching her. |

- 1. Model Sentence:** It was dark / when I got up in the morning, /frosty / when I followed my breath to school.

—Julia Alvarez, “Snow”

- a. It was a fine car, shiny with chrome and paint and sleek in shape, a red convertible designed to have a retro look from the 1950s.
- b. It was early when the bus came by from the school, late when it returned the children to their homes.

- 2. Model Sentence:** She wore her coarse, straight hair, / which was slightly streaked with gray, / in a long braided rope / across the utmost top of her head.

—Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*

- a. They played the grueling, championship matches, which were completely unpredictable by forecasters, with an amazing energy from the weakest players to the strongest.
- b. The arrangement, beautiful, freshly picked from the garden, smelled of a combination of lilies, sage, and magnolia to fill the room with a delightful fresh fragrance.

3. **Model Sentence:** Sometimes he cried, / tears painting lean stripes / down a grimy face, but always quietly.

—Kristin Cashore, *Fire*

- a. Often she painted, brush making colorful shapes across a blank canvas, and never sloppily.
- b. After the party ended, they cleaned up the trash on the property and went home.

4. **Model Sentence:** Kit could see / the little wooden doll, its arms sticking stiffly / into the air, / bobbing helplessly / in the water.

—Elizabeth George Speare, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*

- a. Leaning out towards the ocean, Barb enjoyed the smell and the feel of a steady breeze, her hot face fanned by its softness.
- b. Adam always heard the small nonstop sound, its buzz sounding steadily in his ears, pounding monotonously in his brain.

5. **Model Sentence:** Big, rough teen-agers / moved through the crowd, / their sleeves rolled high enough / to show off / blue and red tattoos.

—Robert Lipsyte, *The Contender*

- a. Lovely, colorful fireworks burst into the sky, their patterns bright enough to light up grey and cloudy skies.
- b. Sirens sounded throughout a crowded highway, warning that some serious event was happening nearby.

ACTIVITY 3: MATCHING

Directions: Find the imitation. Copy the imitation and its model. Then put slash marks (/) in the imitation to show the chunks (sentence parts) are the same.

| MODEL SENTENCE | IMITATION SENTENCE |
|--|---|
| <p>1. Downstairs, / my father was playing the piano, / soft, sad notes floating up / from the living room. —Jacqueline Woodson, <i>Harbor Me</i></p> | <p>a. After she was through, Sarah discovered that she hadn't listened for important facts, so she studied them with an intensity until her brain understood.</p> |
| <p>2. He stays in the air-conditioned cabin, / steering, / pressing the button, / and listening to Motown. —Jewell Parker Rhodes, <i>Ghost Boys</i> (adapted)</p> | <p>b. After you have lived as long as I have, enjoying all my life is like enjoying all delicious desserts.</p> |
| <p>3. As the boys tumbled [<i>jumped</i>] out of the brick schoolhouse across the field from us, / I watched from the window. —Aisha Saeed, <i>Amal Unbound</i></p> | <p>c. Nearby, the driver was changing a tire, curious, other drivers passing by on the country road.</p> |
| <p>4. When you've moved as much as I have, checking out schools is like checking out shoe polish. —Kelly Yang, <i>Front Desk</i></p> | <p>d. She goes to the nearby beach, humming, enjoying the breeze, and putting on lotion.</p> |
| <p>5. When I was seven, Amá found out I hadn't showered for five days, so she scrubbed me with a brush until my skin ached. —Erika L. Sanchez, <i>I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter</i></p> | <p>e. When a branch appeared ahead of his horse on the path, Manuel jumped from the horse.</p> |

ACTIVITY 4: IMITATING MODEL SENTENCES

Directions: Read the model sentence and its imitation. Then write your own imitation with the same chunks (sentence parts) as the model and its imitation. Write about something you saw on TV, the Internet, or in a movie—or something you make up.

On the Mark: Put commas where they appear in the model.

1a. Model Sentence: The elephant / was dying, / in great agony, / very slowly.

—George Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant”

1b. Imitation Sentence: The sunset / was happening, / in sudden beauty, / so colorfully.

2a. Model Sentence: In the back room / of the laboratory, / the white rats / in their cages / ran and skittered and squeaked.

—John Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*

2b. Imitation Sentence: Near the old barn / by the railroad tracks, / the stray cat / in the wild / hunted and lived and slept.

3a. Model Sentence: She pulled out her wand, / a curved length of ivory / carved with pictures of monsters, / and pointed it / at the base of the dome.

—Rick Riordan, *The Throne of Fire*

3b. Imitation Sentence: He put away his knife, / a straight blade of steel / stored in a holder of leather, / and kept it / in a pocket of his pants.

4a. Model Sentence: Fowler reached / across his desk, / and picked up the file, / a thin sheet of paper / neatly clipped together.

—Clifford D. Simak, “Desertion”

4b. Imitation Sentence: Orlando searched / through his mail, / and singled out one item, / a perfumed envelope of pink / beautifully decorated overall.

- 5a. Model Sentence:** A short, round boy of seven, / he took little interest / in troublesome things, / preferring to remain / on good terms / with everyone.

—Mildred D. Taylor, *Roll of Thunder; Hear My Cry*

- 5b. Imitation Sentence:** A caring, loving mother of three, / she carried great concern / for dangerous situations, / wanting to be / on constant watch / for problems.

ACTIVITY 5: MORE IMITATING

Directions: Choose one of the models and write an imitation of the entire sentence, one chunk (sentence part) at a time. See if your class can guess your model. If they can, congratulations!

MODELS

1. Henry, / the elevator operator, / is always making jokes / about me and Sheila.

—Judy Blume, *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*

2. Before I was born, / the doctors / realized / that there was something wrong with my face.

—R. J. Palacio, *Wonder*

3. The penguins, / standing politely in two rows of six each, / looked curiously / at Mr. Greenbaum.

—Richard and Florence Atwater, *Mr. Popper's Penguins*

4. To keep ourselves / from going crazy / from boredom, / we tried / to think of word games.

—Barbara Kingsolver, *The Bean Trees*

5. He had / some mouthwash, / which was horrible stuff / that his mother made him gargle / when he had a cold.

—Lynne Reid Banks, *The Return of the Indian*

QUIZ: STARTING SENTENCE IMITATING

Directions: Jot down whether the statement is true or false.

1. A good sentence imitation has the same kind of chunks as the model sentence.
2. Chunks mean the same thing as sentence parts.
3. Only some sentences can be divided into chunks.
4. Both sentences under the model sentence imitate this model sentence:

Model Sentence: When I was in elementary school, I packed my suitcase and told my mother I was going to run away from home.

—Jean Craighead George, *My Side of the Mountain*

- a. Before I was on the team, I practiced my swing and told the coach I was trying to come back from the bench.
 - b. Once, as a little kid, I dreamed I was big and could do everything my big brother could do so well.
5. Imitating a sentence means using your own words but only a few of the same kinds of chunks as the model sentence.