

Getting Started with Middle School Sentence Composing

A Student Worktext

Don and Jenny Killgallon

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QUICKSHOTS FOR NEW WORDS 1

Inside, you'll meet new words, but you'll get instant help to learn what they mean. A quickshot is a familiar word placed right next to an unfamiliar word to keep you reading smoothly.

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Sentence-composing tools are sentence parts, not complete sentences. If a tool is written with a capital letter and ends with a period, it is a broken sentence, just a piece of a sentence, a fragment. In this section you'll learn to spot and repair broken sentences, or, even better, avoid them in your writing.

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—Thomas Rockwell, *How to Eat Fried Worms*

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You'll imitate and compose sentences like this:

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—Henry Gregor Felsen, “Horatio”

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

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After a minute, two of the creatures, **a doe and her fawn**, moved hesitantly down the slope, **looking at him curiously**.

—Alexander Key, *The Forgotten Door*

THE TOOLBOX 114

To get the job done right in your sentences, use the right tools in the right places. You've learned all of the right places to build stronger sentences. Those power places are in your toolbox. Get ready to use them in this section. When you finish, admire your work, done right with the right tools in the right places, and take a bow.

THE SENTENCE-COMPOSING APPROACH

Nothing is more satisfying than to write a good sentence.

—Barbara Tuchman, historian

LEARNING BY IMITATING

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

Those activities, and many more, show that imitating 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 as they do.

First, look at some sentence imitations. Below is a model followed by five imitations of that model. All six sentences—the model and the imitations—mean something different, but they all have the same kinds of sentence parts. In other words, the imitations are built like the model.

MODEL SENTENCE:

Backing from under the porch on his hands and knees, he touched the lantern and tipped it over.

—William H. Armstrong, *Sounder*

IMITATION SENTENCES:

1. Feeling around with his fingers and hands, the blind man recognized the visitor and greeted him pleasantly.
2. Listening quietly with her mind and heart, the young student understood its importance and treated it seriously.
3. Thinking about the leak with his experience and knowledge, the emergency plumber identified the problem and fixed it easily.
4. Moving toward the sound from the doorbell and intercom, the little girl opened the door and walked through it confidently.
5. Singing into the microphone for the audience and judges, the contestant amazed the audience and finished the song triumphantly.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD MODEL SENTENCE?

Sentences worth imitating appear in almost everything we read. Throughout this worktext are hundreds of model sentences from all kinds of writing, from classics like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, from fantasies like the Harry Potter novels, from popular favorites like *The Hunger Games*, from children’s literature like *A Wrinkle in Time*, and from spy stories, horror stories, true stories, love stories, sports stories, funny stories, sci-fi stories, and on and on.

Despite the wide range of sources—from children’s literature to classic novels—all the model sentences in *Getting Started with Middle School Sentence Composing* illustrate the use of powerful tools to build strong sentences.

The positions where tools can be used within a sentence—the beginning (opener), middle (split), ending (closer)—are the focus of this worktext. After learning them through the activities in this worktext, you can be a builder of strong sentences. Here are a few examples.

1. From *To Kill a Mockingbird*: **When he was nearly thirteen**, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow.
—Harper Lee
2. From *The Underground*: Earth, **our little blue and green planet, the one with the fluffy white clouds and all**, is under attack.
—K. A. Applegate
3. From *A Wrinkle in Time*: Charles Wallace slid down from his chair and trotted over to the refrigerator, **his pajamaed feet padding softly as a kitten’s**.
—Madeleine L’Engle

Those three sentences are examples of sentence-building tools you’ll learn, practice, and use through the activities in this worktext, then use to build your own strong sentences in and beyond middle school.

ACTIVITY 1: UNDERSTANDING SENTENCE PARTS

Directions: To imitate a sentence, first you need to see its parts. In reading and writing, understanding sentence parts is helpful. Read the following sentences broken into meaningful sentence parts. Pause after each slash mark.

EXAMPLES

1. People are edging closer, / snapping pictures, / taking video / with their phones.

—Jewell Parker Rhodes, *Ghost Boys*

2. My schoolmates / watched time crawl / every afternoon, / waiting an eternity / for the three o'clock bell.

—Keith Donohue, *The Stolen Child*

3. Nancy had been dreaming all night, / and when she woke in the morning / it was with the strange sensation / that she had come back / from a long journey, / leaving part of herself behind.

—Lois Duncan, *A Gift of Magic*

4. I picture myself / at the top of the Eiffel Tower, / climbing pyramids in Egypt, / dancing in the streets in Spain, / riding in a boat in Venice, / and walking on the Great Wall of China.

—Erika L. Sánchez, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*

5. John, / who is an older man, / falls in love with Mary, / and Mary, / who is only twenty-two, / feels sorry for him / because he's worried / about his hair falling out.

—Margaret Atwood, "Happy Endings"

ACTIVITY 2: SPOTTING IMITATION SENTENCES

Directions: Underneath the author’s sentence are three sentences. Which *two* sentences imitate the author’s sentence because, although different in meaning, they have similar sentence parts?

1. **Model Sentence:** A small man, he wore a cotton shirt and a long, bloodstained smock.

—Christopher Paolini, *Eragon*

- a. The fastest hunters, cheetahs have a flexible spine and four hard, rubbery feet.
 - b. The shopkeeper was not prepared for a group of teenage girls who wanted lipsticks.
 - c. A good friend, Janelle told an interesting story and a hilarious, clever joke.
2. **Model Sentence:** After a minute, two of the creatures, a doe and her fawn, moved hesitantly down the **slope** [*hill*] and stood looking at him curiously.

—Alexander Key, *The Forgotten Door*

- a. After the sunset, all of the tourists, some kids and their parents, walked slowly toward the parking lot and strolled looking for their cars carefully.
 - b. In an hour, two of the eggs, a bird and its sibling, hatched noisily in the nest and started peering at the world curiously.
 - c. A husband and his wife looked enthusiastically at the house for sale and started talking to each other about whether to buy it.
3. **Model Sentence:** He walked right into the punch, a ton of concrete that slammed into his mouth.

—Robert Lipsyte, *The Contender*

- a. Cinderella danced gracefully to the music, a melody of beauty that contrasted with her life.
 - b. Alfie slept soundly throughout the night, a time of rest that settled down his nerves.
 - c. Not sure what would happen next, the security guard watched constantly and intensely.
4. **Model Sentence:** He brushed two saddle horses in the stalls, talking quietly to them all the time.

—John Steinbeck, *The Red Pony*

- a. She petted both little kittens in the box, whispering softly to them all the while.
 - b. After the rain stopped, she gathered the plants from the porch and took them inside.
 - c. Mr. Cromwell noticed several small children on the beach, playing happily with each other all the time.
5. **Model Sentence:** I kept my eyes on my hands on the desk, waiting for something to happen, an explosion, a battle cry, a noise, anything but the silence.

—Rosa Guy, *The Friends*

- a. The basketball team approached the court with no confidence at all because they expected not to beat the first-place team.
- b. The general led his soldiers into the battle on the field, searching for anything to happen, a shot, a canon roar, a surrender, anything but a defeat.
- c. The scientist kept his attention on the test tubes in the rack, hoping for many changes to occur, a combination, a different color, a reaction, everything but a disappointment.

ACTIVITY 3: MATCHING MODEL AND IMITATION SENTENCES

Directions: Match the imitation with the model it imitates.

Model Sentence	Imitation Sentence
<p>1. Stepping upon the cold surface, Buck's feet sank into a white mushy something that felt like mud. —Jack London, <i>The Call of the Wild</i> (adapted)</p>	<p>a. Leaping with power, the dolphin broke the water's surface, feeling it open from the power of its jump.</p>
<p>2. Shivering with nausea, Regis pulled the leech away, feeling it tear from the flesh of his lips. —Michael Crichton, <i>Jurassic Park</i></p>	<p>b. Whispering a prayer under her breath so that her family and friends would be safe, she began to smile.</p>
<p>3. Wanda Gambling, a well-known movie star on her way to 96th Street, once got stuck behind a gasoline truck. —Jean Merrill, <i>The Pushcart War</i> (adapted)</p>	<p>c. Hail and lightning, scattering the audience in minutes, arose suddenly to end the outdoor rock concert.</p>
<p>4. Stacey and T.J., ignoring the rest of us, wandered off to be with the other seventh grade boys. —Mildred D. Taylor, <i>Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry</i></p>	<p>d. Looking into the dark heavens, the astronomer noticed in a starry sky a constellation that looked like dots.</p>
<p>5. Holding a hand before her eyes so that other patients and visitors could not see, she began to weep. —J. M. Coetzee, <i>Life and Times of Michael K</i></p>	<p>e. The mosquito, a bothersome local insect on the lookout for fresh blood, sometimes gets swatted by an irritated host.</p>

ACTIVITY 4: UNSCRAMBLING TO IMITATE

Directions: Unscramble the sentence parts to imitate the model sentence. Start with the first sentence part listed.

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

EXAMPLE

Model Sentence: Her heart hammering in her chest, Clary ducked behind the nearest concrete pillar and looked around it.

—Cassandra Clare, *City of Bones*

SENTENCE PARTS TO UNSCRAMBLE TO IMITATE THE MODEL SENTENCE:

- a. (*Start here.*) His blood gushing from the wound
- b. and screamed for help
- c. Sammy
- d. raced toward the crowded parking lot

Imitation Sentence: His blood gushing from the wound, Sammy raced toward the crowded parking lot and screamed for help.

1. **Model Sentence:** All four members of Maxwell, the other team in the final round, were in the eighth grade.

—E. L. Konigsburg, *The View from Saturday*

- a. (*Start here.*) All ten cheerleaders
- b. were with their team coach
- c. at Avery
- d. the best squad in the final competition

2. **Model Sentence:** Artemis **generally** [*usually*] had this effect on people, an adolescent speaking with the authority and vocabulary of a powerful adult.

—Eoin Colfer, *Artemis Fowl*

- a. (*Start here.*) Mandela
 - b. with the hope and inspiration of a blossoming leader
 - c. often created great enthusiasm in people
 - d. a survivor sparkling
3. **Model Sentence:** He lifted the **stump** [*remainder*] of the severed leg out of the **foliage** [*bushes*], raising it into the light of the headlamps as blood from the stump gushed down over his hand.

—Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park*

- a. (*Start here.*) He
 - b. as notes from the orchestra sounded loudly over the theater
 - c. pounding it with the strength of his arms
 - d. hit the gong of the loudest drum in the orchestra
4. **Model Sentence:** After the first weeks of school, when everything seemed gloomy and I still worried a great deal about having left home, things started to get easier.

—Ved Mehta, “A Donkey in a World of Horses” (adapted)

- a. (*Start here.*) After the sudden attack on 9-11
- b. at the twin towers of the World Trade Center
- c. when confusion was constant
- d. shock started to set in
- e. and the nation barely processed the terrifying attack

5. **Model Sentence:** He **scrutinized** [*looked at*] the beggars at the door, a woman with a bent back, an old blind man praying, and many other **wretched** [*unfortunate*] **alms-seekers** [*beggars*].

—Eric P. Kelly, *The Trumpeter of Krakow* (adapted)

- a. (*Start here.*) Jason
- b. and several more community members
- c. a mother with a small child
- d. a senior citizen reading
- e. registered the voters in the gym

ACTIVITY 5: IMITATING MODEL SENTENCES

Directions: Study the model sentence and a sample imitation to see how both sentences are built alike. Then write your own imitation about something you know, something you’ve experienced, or something you’ve seen in media.

Tip: Take it easy. Imitate one sentence part at a time because the best way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. Here are the sentence parts of the model and its imitation parts.

Model Sentence Parts	Imitation Sentence Parts
<p>1. a. Little Man, b. a very small six-year-old c. and a most finicky [<i>fussy</i>] dresser, d. was brushing his hair e. when I entered. —Mildred D. Taylor, <i>Song of the Trees</i></p>	<p>a. Hurricane Irma, b. a very big fast-moving storm c. and a powerful wind maker, d. was coming ashore e. when we vacationed.</p>

Model Sentence Parts	Imitation Sentence Parts
<p>2. a. Fussing with her skirt, b. straightening it, c. she looked across the room d. to Romey and Ima Dean. —Bill and Vera Cleaver, <i>Where the Lilies Bloom</i></p>	<p>a. Dangling over the falls, b. watching them, c. the daredevil looked into the crowd d. for his wife and kids.</p>
<p>3. a. As the gong of the bell sounded b. across the playground, c. I picked up my pencils d. and notebook e. and ran inside. —Mildred D. Taylor, <i>Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry</i></p>	<p>a. After the signs of the dawn appeared b. in her window, c. Glenda turned over her blanket d. and sheets e. and got up.</p>
<p>4. a. Its engine snarling b. like a hunting panther, c. the car jolted forward d. so fast that my body slammed e. into the black leather seat, f. my stomach flattening against my spine. —Stephenie Meyer, <i>Breaking Dawn</i></p>	<p>a. Its approach nearing b. like a terrifying monster, c. the tiger moved nearby d. so close that my heart pounded e. under my heavy breathing chest, f. my fear rising with each second.</p>

Learning to build strong sentences by imitating the way authors build strong sentences makes sense because it works.

In the next section, you'll see three sentence-composing places within a sentence authors use to build their strong sentences: beginning, middle, and end. Then, in the rest of this worktext, you'll learn, practice, and use those places to build your sentences the way authors build theirs.

QUIZ: LEARNING BY IMITATING

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

1. Imitating is a common way to learn something.
2. Imitating sentences by authors means using most of their words in your own sentence structure.
3. Imitating sentences by authors means using their sentence structure but your own words.
4. Imitating how an author's model sentence is built requires building your sentence mostly like the author's sentence.
5. All three sentences underneath the model sentence imitate how that model is built.

Model Sentence: The two bellhops, their bright blue uniforms already smudged from their efforts, took hold of the heavy trunk by the corners.

—Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow*

1. The little kids, their freshly laundered clothing nearly filthy from their playing, sat down on the muddy bank by the river.
2. Its rays shining over the ocean, the sunset was enjoyed most nights by the people sitting or strolling on the Florida beach.
3. A colorful bird, its startlingly red feathers very dazzling in their brightness, took off from the thick bush outside our window.

PREVIEW: THE SENTENCE-COMPOSING POSITIONS

In the sentence-composing toolbox of good writers are three positions to add tools: *openers*, *splits*, *closers*. A sentence might also include a mix of these tools. The positions provide places to build better sentences like those of good writers, including famous authors.

The first version of the following paired sentences does not include tools. The second version does. As you read the paired sentences, notice how much more informative and powerful the second version is because of its use of tools.

.....

OPENERS give your readers important information at the beginning of a sentence.

.....

1a. Sloan seemed to care for only his daughter.

1b. **A widower**, Sloan seemed to care for only his daughter.

—Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*

2a. She plunged over the side of the boat.

2b. **Kicking off her buckled shoes and dropping the woolen cloak**, she plunged over the side of the boat.

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

3a. All my dishes came crashing down.

3b. **As my small back gave in to the mountainous weight**, all my dishes came crashing down.

—Kelly Yang, *Front Desk*

4a. I packed my suitcase and told my mother I was going to run away from home.

4b. **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*

SPLITS give your readers important details after the beginning of the sentence but before the end of the sentence. They split the subject from the predicate.

5a. The other pill came up again promptly along with the bowl of soup she'd forced down earlier.

5b. The other pill, **an aspirin she got down the boy's throat with great difficulty**, came up again promptly along with the bowl of soup she'd forced down earlier.

—Katherine Paterson, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*

6a. The hangman was waiting beside the gallows.

6b. The hangman, **a grey-haired convict in the white uniform of the prison**, was waiting beside the gallows.

—George Orwell, "A Hanging" (adapted)

7a. The creatures were all watching him intently.

7b. The creatures, **some sitting on chairs and others reclining on a sofa**, were all watching him intently.

—Roald Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*

8a. Henry rushed out of his cabin.

8b. Henry, **when his shaking had stopped a little**, rushed out of his cabin.

—John Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*

CLOSERS give your readers important details at the closing of the sentence.

9a. The dictionary had a picture of an aardvark.

9b. The dictionary had a picture of an aardvark, **a long-tailed, long-eared, burrowing African mammal living off termites caught by sticking out its tongue as an anteater does for ants.**

—Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

10a. She trailed her fingers through the flour.

10b. She trailed her fingers through the flour, **parting and separating small hills and ridges of it to look for mites.**

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (adapted)

11a. The dragon snarled his fearsome snarl.

11b. The dragon snarled his fearsome snarl, **his forked tongue hanging between teeth almost as long as fence pickets.**

—Stephen King, *The Eyes of the Dragon*

12a. All the trouble began.

12b. All the trouble began **when my grandfather died and my grandmother came to live with us.**

—Frank O'Connor, "First Confession"

MIXES give your readers important details in more than one place within a sentence.

13a. She sat in a rocking chair.

13b. **A beautiful college student**, she sat in a rocking chair, **looking very calm and composed**. (*Contains an opener and a closer.*)

—Michael Crichton, *Travels* (adapted)

14a. Alfie Simkins came home from football practice every evening bruised and aching.

14b. Alfie Simkins, **a roommate of yours**, came home from football practice every evening bruised and aching, **his hand scarcely able to shovel the mashed potatoes into his mouth**. (*Contains a split and a closer.*)

—Paul Roberts, “*How to Say Nothing in Five Hundred Words*” (adapted)

15a. Everybody for a hundred yards stared.

15b. **When the snake wrangler pulled out the plywood boxes with snakes out of the station wagon**, everybody for a hundred yards stared, **snapping their heads around at the sound**. (*Contains an opener and a closer.*)

—Michael Crichton, *Travels* (adapted)
