

Nonfiction for Middle School

A Sentence-Composing Approach

A Student Worktext

Don and Jenny Killgallon

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Nothing is more satisfying than to write a good sentence.

—Barbara Tuchman, two-time winner of the Pulitzer prize for nonfiction

NONFICTION: WORDS FROM REAL LIFE

All of the excerpts in this worktext are *nonfiction*, the branch of literature that is not fiction, poetry, or drama. That's what nonfiction is not, but what is it?

NONFICTION DEFINED

Nonfiction is writing that's about what's real. Unlike fiction, none is made up. There are many kinds of nonfiction, including these:

- real people (biography)
- real thoughts (essays)
- real information (articles in magazines and newspapers, print or digital)
- real current events (news and journalism)
- real past events (history)
- real facts, processes, wikis, and blogs (information)
- real opinions about how good—or bad—things are (reviews)
- real memories (memoirs)
- real famous words (famous quotes, public documents, speeches)
- real memorable correspondence (letters)
- real education or instruction (textbooks, manuals, how-tos).

TRUE VS. FICTIONAL STORIES

Fiction is any story, short or long (novel), mostly from the author's imagination. Its source is the head of the author, not the history of an event (journalism) nor the facts of a real person's life (biography) nor the ideas of a person (essay) nor any other kind of nonfiction.

A fictional story never really happened except in the author's imagination. Think Harry Potter.

A nonfictional story did really happen and is based upon fact. Think Harry Truman, American two-term president from 1945 to 1953, whose biography *Truman* by David McCollough is a nonfiction account of Harry Truman's life.

Another difference is that nonfiction is based upon reality; fiction, upon make-believe. Harry Potter, in actuality, couldn't fly on a broomstick during Quidditch; however, in make-believe, through the skill and creativity of author J. K. Rowling (and through C.G.I. in the movie versions), Harry appears to be actually flying during Quidditch matches in the wizardly world at Hogwarts. Because of Rowling's skill in creating its realistic details, the flying seems to be actual—but isn't.

In actuality, though, President Harry Truman did order the first and only military use of an atomic bomb to speed the end of World War II. The bombing actually happened on August 6 in the city of Hiroshima, Japan, and August 9, 1945 in Nagasaki, Japan. The true story of one of those two cities is a nonfiction book titled *Hiroshima* by John Hersey, who went to that city, interviewed six survivors, and reported their experiences, observations.

The main difference between fiction and nonfiction is that fiction reflects scenes from an author's imagination, while nonfiction reflects events from an author's research, investigation, and discovery.

Much nonfiction, like most fiction, tells stories—real narratives of actual events (history or current events), or of real people (biography). Nonfiction authors try to tell those narratives truthfully, factually, to reflect accurately the event or the person they chronicle.

Other kinds of nonfiction tell the actuality of thought or procedure. Speeches or letters reveal the thoughts of the speaker or writer. Essays or articles or reviews reveal the opinion of the author.

In *Nonfiction for Middle School: A Sentence-Composing Approach*, you'll analyze nonfiction of various types by hundreds of authors—usually excerpts of sentences or paragraphs. Some are from biographies, some from essays, some from journalism articles, some from informational texts, some from

public documents or speeches, some from stories of actual events or lives of real people.

ACTIVITY 1: FICTION OR NONFICTION?

Listed randomly are landmark titles of fiction and nonfiction known to culturally literate readers. Write *F* for fiction, *NF* for nonfiction. If you aren't sure, research the title to find out.

1. <i>In the Kingdom of Ice</i> Hampton Sides	11. <i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i> Maya Angelou
2. <i>Flowers for Algernon</i> Daniel Keyes	12. <i>Black Boy</i> Richard Wright
3. <i>Lord of the Flies</i> William Golding	13. <i>Looking for Alaska</i> John Green
4. <i>The Road Not Taken</i> Robert Frost	14. <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> Lorraine Hansberry
5. <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> William Shakespeare	15. <i>The Story of My Life</i> Helen Keller
6. <i>Into the Wild</i> Jon Krakauer	16. <i>Go Ask Alice</i> Beatrice Sparks
7. Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson	17. <i>Unbroken</i> Laura Hillenbrand
8. <i>I Am Malala</i> Malala Yousafzai	18. <i>Night</i> Elie Wiesel
9. <i>The Hunger Games</i> Suzanne Collins	19. <i>Divergent</i> Veronica Roth
10. <i>Walden</i> Henry David Thoreau	20. <i>The Fault in Our Stars</i> John Green

NONFICTION TOPICS

What topics are subjects of nonfiction? Count the number of grains of sand in all the deserts of the Earth, and then count the number of drops of water in all the oceans on the planet, and then multiply both figures by a billion trillion. That's how many topics nonfiction has been written about—from *A* to *Z*, from common subjects (cars, travel, sports, health, friendship, money, and a billion more) to complex subjects (metaphysics, astrobiology, mycology, phylogeny, ontogeny, postmodernism, and a billion more).

A popular category of nonfiction is how-to books. On the Internet, amazon.com lists over 600,000 titles beginning with *How to*. Here are only a few of probably millions of such books:

- *How to Train a Wild Elephant* by Jan Chozen Bays
- *How to Babysit a Grandpa* by Jean Reagan and Lee Wildish
- *How to Cook Everything* by Mark Bittman
- *How to Be Photogenic: A Guide for Girls and Guys to Look Better in Pictures!* by F. Saeyang
- *How to Be Interesting (In 10 Simple Steps)* by Jessica Hagy
- *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- *How to Raise the Perfect Dog: Through Puppyhood and Beyond* by Cesar Millan
- *How to Build a Fire: And Other Handy Things Your Grandfather Knew* by Erin Bried
- *How to Write a Book This Weekend, Even If You Flunked English Like I Did* by Vic Johnson

In *Nonfiction for Middle School: A Sentence-Composing Approach*, you'll read just a tiny bit of varied nonfiction, but through the activities, you'll increase

your ability to read more deeply and write nonfiction more skillfully. (None will assign you to write a book over the weekend. Promise.)

IMPORTANCE OF NONFICTION

Why learn how to read and write nonfiction? Something done frequently should be something done well. Nonfiction is the kind of writing you'll probably read most often in college or the workplace. In college, students read textbooks, print and digital, in almost all courses, and they are expected to master the contents on their own—scientific data, mathematical theories, psychology studies, anthropological research reports, and many others. At work, employees often are required to read database information, operational and procedural manuals, product descriptions and inventories, focus group summaries evaluating products and services, comparative market statistics, and much more. A lot of that nonfiction is challenging, requiring advanced skills of interpreting for reading, and composing for writing.

Beyond college or career, many people simply enjoy reading nonfiction for entertainment, information, or recreation, sometimes preferring it over fiction.

The purpose of this worktext is to help you become a better reader and writer of any nonfiction, including kinds requiring deep reading.

Force yourself to reflect on what you read, sentence by sentence, and paragraph by paragraph.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

UBER-LITERACY

By focusing on nonfiction sentences and paragraphs—how they are built and how they convey meaning—this worktext, *Nonfiction for Middle School: A Sentence-Composing Approach*, promotes uber-literacy, the kind of deep

reading that characterizes skillful readers. Carefully completing activities in this worktext, you can become not just literate. You can become uber-literate. Just so you know, the prefix *uber-* means “very.”

Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.

—Richard Steele

YOUR TURN: SUMMARIZING

A good way to learn something is to teach it. That’s because to teach requires understanding of the topic taught.

Pretend your classmate had to miss school during the time your class learned about nonfiction presented in this section **NONFICTION: WORDS FROM REAL LIFE**. Your classmate sent you a text or email asking you to summarize what the class learned about nonfiction versus fiction.

Write a summary of what you learned about nonfiction to send to your friend so she or he can keep up with the class and not fall behind.

Even though this situation is fictitious, you will benefit because you’ll be acting like a teacher, strengthening what you know about nonfiction. Often teachers themselves learn more deeply what is taught to their students.

Directions: After reviewing the information in this section, do the following to prepare a good summary of what’s there.

1. Review the information about nonfiction in this section.
2. Explain the differences between nonfiction and fiction.
3. List and explain important terms and categories of nonfiction for an absentee.

4. Explain benefits of reading nonfiction.
 5. Draft your summary, including information about nonfiction terms, types, and benefits.
 6. Include your best sentence and paragraph style, so good that your summary could be published as an example of excellent student writing (or maybe tacked on your teacher's bulletin board).
 7. Exchange your draft with other students in your class for suggestions to improve your summary of nonfiction, and give them suggestions, too. Then revise several times until your summary is finished.
-

When you finish, congratulations! You've learned—and taught—a lot about nonfiction, and you are ready to move on in this worktext to deepen your knowledge and skill in reading and writing nonfiction.

MIRROR IMAGES: IMITATING NONFICTION SENTENCES

Because nonfiction sentences are very different from the sentences we speak, learning how to read and write those sentences is very important to improve your reading and writing. This section, imitating model sentences and paragraphs from nonfiction sources, will show you how.

*My entire writing career fueled itself with
the **mimicry** [imitation] of sentences
of the great writers I loved the best.*

Pat Conroy, *My Reading Life*

The building blocks of nonfiction, sentences are a good place to start learning how authors write. Imitating their methods will help you build sentences like theirs.

ACTIVITY 1: IDENTIFYING MEANINGFUL SENTENCE PARTS

Identify the sentence divided into sentence parts that make sense.

- 1a. I looked with / a mixture of admiration and awe at / Peter, a boy who could and did imitate / a police siren every / morning on his way to the / showers.
- 1b. I looked / with a mixture of admiration / and awe at Peter, / a boy who could and did imitate a police siren / every morning / on his way to the showers.

Robert Russell, *To Catch an Angel*

- 2a. Gimble the chimpanzee / started leaping about in the tree / tops, swinging vigorously from / one branch to the next, climbing up then / jumping down to catch himself on a / bough below.

- 2b. Gimble the chimpanzee / started leaping about / in the tree tops,
swinging vigorously / from one branch to the next, climbing up / then
jumping down to catch himself / on a bough below.

Jane Goodall, *Through a Window*

- 3a. Contrary to / popular / impressions, leprosy is not highly / contagious.
3b. Contrary / to popular impressions, / leprosy is not / highly contagious.

Norman Cousins, *Anatomy of an Illness*

- 4a. Robert dove deep / into chemistry and physics in high school, /
graduated from Harvard University in 1925, / then earned advanced
degrees at top universities / in Britain and Germany.
4b. Robert dove deep into / chemistry and physics in high school, /
graduated from Harvard / University in 1925, then earned advanced /
degrees at top universities in Britain and / Germany.

Steve Sheinkin, *Bomb*

- 5a. Back in / London, the ship had been / visited by two officers from
Scotland / Yard, patrolling the wharves in / hopes of **thwarting**
[preventing] the / couple's escape.
5b. Back in London, / the ship had been visited / by two officers from
Scotland Yard, / patrolling the wharves / in hopes / of thwarting the
couple's escape.

Erik Larson, *Thunderstruck*

ACTIVITY 2: CHUNKING SENTENCE IMITATIONS

Copy the model and the one sentence in the pair that imitates it. Chunk the model and its imitation into equivalent sentence parts.

EXAMPLE

Model Sentence: For several days, Henrietta's corpse lay in the hallway of the house, doors propped open at each end to let in the cool wet breeze that would keep her body fresh.

Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lack*

- a. After the paint finally dried on the wicker chair, the paint can sat in the sun outside the shed, and its lid was closed tight so that the paint inside wouldn't dry out.
- b. With only a dollar, Ryan's wallet sat on the counter of the cashier, his pockets both searched to find in at least one some coins that would supply the balance.

Imitation Sentence: b

Meaningful Chunks: (The number and placement of chunks may vary. Here is one possibility.)

1. For several days, / Henrietta's corpse lay / in the hallway of the house, / doors propped open at each end / to let in the cool wet breeze / that would keep her body fresh.
2. With only a dollar, / Tenell's wallet sat / on the counter of the cashier, / his pockets both searched / to find in at least one some coins / that would supply the remaining balance.

1. **Model Sentence:** Mom, in an unnaturally calm voice, explained what had happened and asked if we could have a ride to the hospital.

Jeanette Walls, *The Glass Castle*

- a. Darlene, at an annoyingly rapid pace, described what they had said and explained that she could no longer put up with that behavior.
- b. Frank, hoping not to be overheard by anyone, yelled to his sister about what was happening in the kitchen after they ate.

2. **Model Sentence:** On her monthly visits, dressed in stylish **vintage** [old] furs, diamonds, and spike heels, which constantly caught between loose floorboards, she forced smiles and held her tongue.

Maya Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*

- a. In his comfortable car, dressed in denim blue jeans, flannels, and tennis shoes, which frequently drummed on the gray floor mats, he hummed tunes and watched the traffic.
 - b. In late afternoons, thinking about the chores that had been completed and those still left to do, which bothered him, he tried to enjoy the beautiful weather in spite of his obligations.
3. **Model Sentence:** Anne Frank, who was thirteen when she began her diary and fifteen when she was forced to stop, wrote without **reserve** [shyness] about her likes and dislikes.

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

- a. Benjamin Franklin, a famous American inventor and interesting historical figure, is credited with flying the kite that led to the discovery of electricity.
 - b. Jane Eyre, who was a child when the novel of her name began and nineteen when she was able to marry, spoke with honesty about her likes and experiences.
4. **Model Sentence:** The *Carpathia*'s ship's passengers pitched in **gallantly** [unselfishly] to help the survivors of the *Titanic*, providing extra toothbrushes, lending clothes, sewing smocks for the children out of steamer blankets brought along in the lifeboats.

Walter Lord, *A Night to Remember*

- a. Neighboring states near New Orleans worked **diligently** [hard] to provide relief to the victims of Hurricane Katrina, establishing

relief centers, providing food, giving water to the victims out of clean supplies ferried in from nearby reservoirs.

- b. The neighbors of the burned-out village wanted to help those who had survived by sharing with them what food, clothing, and supplies they were able to **accumulate** [*gather*] from donations and from stores, which provided free baby supplies.

5. **Model Sentence:** Lincoln knew that many citizens of the North had lost their stomach for this war, with its modern technology like repeating rifles and long-range artillery that have brought about staggering losses of life.

Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard, *Killing Lincoln*

- a. Jeff Bezos, **entrepreneur** [*businessman*] and **innovator** [*inventor*], changed the way people shop, including online, through making many products like books, music, videos, even clothes and shoes, available with one-click shopping.
- b. Steve Jobs realized that many people in the world had raised their interest in his products, with their amazing innovations like iTunes and iPhones that have made happen incredible advances in technology.

ACTIVITY 3: MATCHING

Match the imitation with the model it imitates.

Model Sentences	Imitations
<p>1. While everyone scattered, I crept into my favorite hiding place, the little closet tucked under the stairs.</p> <p>Jean Fritz, <i>Homesick: My Own Story</i></p>	<p>a. The sound of string guitar, the most important instrument in the band, was suddenly throbbing and harmonizing with the singer.</p>

<p>2. Still in pajamas, Harry Gold raced around his cluttered bedroom, pulling out desk drawers, tossing boxes out of the closet, and yanking books from the shelves.</p> <p>Steve Sheinkin, <i>Bomb</i></p> <p>3. The first gray light had just appeared in the living room windows, black mirrors a moment ago, now opening on the view of the woods to the south.</p> <p>Tracy Kidder, <i>Old Friends</i></p> <p>4. When I went out to my woodpile, I observed two large ants, the one red, the other much larger, fiercely contending [<i>fighting</i>] with one another.</p> <p>Henry David Thoreau, <i>Walden</i></p> <p>5. The face of Liliana Methol, the fifth woman in the plane, was badly bruised and covered with blood.</p> <p>Piers Paul Read, <i>Alive</i></p>	<p>b. Never without advisors, FDR moved to the Oval Office, asking for honest reaction, watching faces in the inner circle, and shuffling papers around his desk.</p> <p>c. After he went over the accounting figures, he saw several disturbing problems, the one careless, the other obviously planned, undoubtedly pointing toward illegal activity.</p> <p>d. When the rain ended, Levar came out from the shelter, a temporary tent made from a cardboard box.</p> <p>e. The last night sounds had just faded amid the small town shops, stores alive until then, now shutting down the commerce of the businesses in the town.</p>
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Only through imitation do we develop toward originality.

—John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley in Search of America*

ACTIVITY 4: IMITATING SENTENCES OF AUTHORS

Write an imitation of the model sentence, building your sentence like the model by writing similar sentence parts. In your imitation sentence—after learning more online or offline about your topic—tell information your readers might not know about any of these topics: culture, entertainment,

health, history, inventions, literature, media, politics, religion, science, space, sports, technology, transportation, or some other interesting topic.

EXAMPLE

Model: Jackie Robinson's complex fate was to be the first black player in the major leagues of baseball in America in the twentieth century.

Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography*

Sample Imitation: Elvis Presley's **toxic** [*poisonous*] destiny was to be the most recognizable superstar in the entertainment world with zero chance of privacy.

1. **Model:** He fell back, exhausted, his ankle pounding.

Ralph Ellison, "Flying Home"

Sample Imitation: Florence Griffith Joyner stood up, triumphant, her victory **assured** [guaranteed].

2. **Model:** He lived alone, a **gaunt** [*thin*], stooped figure who wore a heavy black overcoat and a misshapen **fedora** [*hat*] on those rare occasions when he left his apartment.

Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father*

Sample Imitation: Harper Lee lived **frugally** [*thriftily*], a small intense woman who shared an undying literary interest and a burning ambition with her few friends after her arrival in New York City.

3. **Model:** In his room on the ground floor, to the right of the front door, Father Kleinsorge changed into a military uniform, which he had **acquired** [*gotten*] when he was teaching at the school in Kobe and which he wore during air-raid alerts.

John Hersey, *Hiroshima*

Sample Imitation: On the way to the fire drill, outside the school's main entrance, high school teachers recorded the presence of students, which they had been instructed to do when there was any emergency drill at school and which they took very seriously when emergencies arose.

4. **Model:** Concerned with her father, who lay dying in the bedroom, but not wanting to miss the moon landing, Phyllis was with her father when her mother called her to come and see Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon.

Frank McCourt, *Teacher Man*

Sample Imitation: Awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, which seldom has been given to a female writer, and publishing only story collections and one novel, Alice Munro was not at home when the Awards Committee called her to announce the prize and congratulate her on her achievement.

5. **Model:** Seventeenth century European women and men sometimes wore beauty patches in the shape of hearts, suns, moons, and stars, applying them to their breasts and faces, to draw an admirer's eye away from any **imperfections** [*blemishes*], which, in that era, too often included smallpox scars.

Diane Ackerman, "The Face of Beauty"

Sample Imitation: Twenty-first century women and men often wore elaborate tattoos in the shape of animals, scripture, people, and sayings, displaying them on any part of their bodies, to make a comment on their lifestyles, which, in this time, very often included **discretionary** [*additional*] income.

YOUR TURN: IMITATING WITHIN A PARAGRAPH

Research a famous battle to write an informational paragraph that includes some sentences based on models.

WRITING PROCESS

Researching: Learn online or offline about an important battle. Some possibilities include these battles, or choose a more recent battle of historical significance:

Battle	Where and When
Hastings	England, 1066
Lexington & Concord	Massachusetts, 1775
Waterloo	Belgium, 1815
Gettysburg	Pennsylvania, 1863
Guadalcanal	SW Pacific, 1942–43
Tet Offensive	South Vietnam, 1968

Prewriting: From your research, list facts and details of that battle, including the outcome and historical significance of the battle.

Drafting: Draft a paragraph with information about that battle.

Refining and Revising: Choose *three* of the model sentences below to imitate within your paragraph, using their structure but describing your chosen battle.

MODEL SENTENCES from Steven Kroll’s book *By the Dawn’s Early Light* about the history of the national anthem “Star-Spangled Banner.” Choose three to imitate and include in your paragraph.

1. On June 18, a poorly prepared United States declared war on Great Britain, and for almost two years there were battles on land and sea.

2. Between the 19th and 25th of August, 1814, British troops defeated the inexperienced American militia at Bladensburg, Maryland, burned a defenseless Washington, and returned to their ships to head for Baltimore.
3. At Fort McHenry in Baltimore, the Fort's storm flag, measuring twenty-five by seventeen feet, was flying during the battle.
4. The larger flag, the Fort's garrison flag, was raised in victory celebration as Francis Scott Key, composer of "The Star-Spangled Banner," sailed back to Baltimore.
5. With the collapse of the assault on Baltimore, a peace treaty was signed on December 24, 1814.

Peer Responding: Exchange your draft with other students in your class for suggestions to improve your paragraph, and give them suggestions, too. Then revise until your paragraph is finished.

Creating a Title: Create a memorable title and subtitle, with a colon between them. *Example:* "The Battle at Fort McHenry: A Victory Song for the Nation."