

A WORKTEXT TO BUILD BETTER SENTENCES

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To children everywhere: Kylie, Brennan, Teagan, and all the "grands" to come, all the generations to follow

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For Teachers: Teaching Sentence Composing

"The best [textbook on sentence improvement] appears to be the Killgallon series" (Evans 1987, 9). This comment came from the Canadian Ministry of Education after a two-year research project in which various textbooks on sentence improvement were piloted. Now, four worktexts on sentence composing—for elementary school, middle school, high school, and college—are available from Boynton/Cook, Heinemann for use on any level wherever writing is taught.

Sentence Composing for Elementary School, the latest in the series, is based upon imitation—in the conviction that students learn to write better sentences by imitating better sentences. For that reason, only professionally written sentences, many taken from literature read in the intermediate grades in elementary school, are used as models for students to imitate.

In addition to serving as models for better composing, the exclusive use of professionally written model sentences from widely read preteen literature provides intensive practice in interpreting of sentences. The recurring techniques of chunking, unscrambling, combining, expanding, and imitating require careful reading of authors' sentences, so the many practices enhance students' reading ability.

Many model sentences for *Sentence Composing for Elementary School* were chosen from novels and short stories from these lists of highly regarded preteen literature:

- Newbery Award or Honor books, an annual list of the best children's books published each year.
- New York Times Review of Books: "Reader's Catalog of Titles of Books for Young Readers—Eights, Nines, and Up." This list presents 639 titles arranged in best-selling order. (Where the Wild Things Are is No. 1.)
- National Education Association's list of the 100 titles most frequently recommended by teachers of the elementary grades. (*Charlotte's Web* is No. 1, and therefore the exclusive source for the review practices on pages 114–23.)

From these and other sources—from *Charlotte's Web* to *Harry Potter*—titles recommended for preteens were reviewed to select model sentences used in *Sentence Composing for Elementary School*. With those model sentences, students learn to imitate the way authors use various skills in their writing. The first section of this worktext (Learning Sentence Imitating) provides practice in sentence imitating to teach students the imitating process used throughout the rest of the worktext.

Throughout Sentence Composing for Elementary School, practices use five sentence

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composing techniques: chunking, unscrambling, combining, expanding, and imitating. Students use these techniques to learn how authors use certain skills. For each skill, there are seven practices. After the practices, two applications require students to use the skill in their own writing: one application for sentences, one for a paragraph. Finally, the review at the end of the worktext teaches students how to use the skills in combination within the same sentence.

The skills covered represent the kind of grammatical skills typically taught in the intermediate grades; however, the treatment in *Sentence Composing for Elementary School* is atypical because students see how authors use the skills and learn to imitate them. Imitating better sentences leads to writing better sentences.

As a result of the sentence composing worktext series, the sentence composing approach to writing improvement is widely used in innovative classrooms on all levels—elementary, middle, and high schools and college. The theoretical and historical background of the approach is detailed in *Sentence Composing: The Theory Booklet* (1998), available separately from Boynton/Cook, Heinemann. Here are some excerpts relevant to elementary school.

Sentence Composing: A New Rhetoric

In his *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*, Francis Christensen (1967) said, "I want them [students] to become sentence acrobats, to dazzle by their syntactic dexterity. I'd rather have to deal with hyperemia than anemia" (137). Sentence composing provides necessary and sufficient acrobatic training. All four sentence composing techniques—unscrambling, imitating, combining, expanding—use literature as a school for writing with a faculty of professional writers. The course the faculty brilliantly teaches is crucial to students' success as writers: what Christensen called "syntactic dexterity."

Also in his *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*, Christensen advocated an integration of literature, writing, and grammar: "What I am proposing," he claimed, "carries over of itself into the study of literature. It makes the student *a better reader* of literature *[emphasis added]*. It helps him thread the syntactical mazes of much mature writing. . . ." (137). Through sentence composing activities, students increase their understanding of, and consequent skill in, both literature and writing.

In the past, teachers have neglected the sentence as a way to teach writing, using sentences instead as specimens for dissection, not as models for imitation. Only paragraphs, essays, or stories were used as models. After reading those longer models, students were told by their teachers, "Go, thou, and do likewise." Utterly

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unbreachable, the gap between the long professional model and the student's grasp of it was too wide, and so students were doomed to fall. The reach far exceeded the grasp.

With sentence composing, the gap sharply narrows because the model is graspable: it is only *one sentence long*. Students here, too, are told, "Go, thou, and do likewise." But this time they succeed, often amazingly, students ranging from our most challenged to our most challenging. Here, with only a *single sentence* as the model, and with frequent imitation activities through the four sentence composing techniques, students succeed.

In the past, the sentence was used as an object of analysis, resulting in literary paralysis. Sentence composing reverses the order, on the assumption that "doing" results in "knowing," that imitation leads to acquisition.

Much of the sentence composing approach owes a debt to the pioneering linguist Francis Christensen (1967), the first to see the light, who wrote in *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*, "If the new grammar is to be brought to bear on composition, it must be brought to bear on the rhetoric of the sentence. . . . With hundreds of handbooks and rhetorics to draw from I have never been able to work out a program for teaching the sentence as I find it in the work of contemporary writers" (129).

Francis Christensen's life's work inspired sentence composing, "a program for teaching the sentence as [it is found] in the work of contemporary writers."

The foundation of the sentence composing approach is imitation. Everybody knows that a baby learns to talk partly by imitating the sentences of people who know how to talk. Every teacher of writing needs to know that a student can learn to write partly by imitating the sentences of good writers.

Imitation is both sincere flattery, and profound pedagogy. With the sentence composing approach, students imitate the masters of the art of writing. Our job— and yours—is to show them how.

—Don and Jenny Killgallon Baltimore, Maryland

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For Students: Learning Sentence Composing

Imitation is a good way to learn—at any age. When you first started to walk, you probably imitated your parents. When you first learned to talk, chances are your parents pronounced the words, and you attempted to imitate the same sounds. In learning to walk and to talk, you used models to learn.

Think for a minute about things you learned by imitating people. How about these? What other activities did you learn by imitating?

Playing a sport	Making a sandwich
Operating a computer	Riding a bike
Playing an instrument	Using a new slang expression
Learning a hobby	Changing a diaper

Your goal in this worktext, *Sentence Composing for Elementary School*, is to learn how to compose better sentences by imitating model sentences by real authors. Model sentences in this worktext come from a literary treasure chest:

- books honored with awards;
- classics loved by every generation;
- novels studied by students your age in schools; and
- favorites enjoyed by young people.

Throughout this worktext, you will learn how to write sentences like the sentences of authors. Underneath each model sentence look for the title and the author.

You will practice using the tools authors use to build their sentences. Imitating how authors skillfully use those tools can help you to become a better writer. When you carefully finish the many practices in this book, you will have a "writer's toolbox" to use to build better sentences.

Practice 1: Chunking

People read and write sentences one sentence part at a time. Each sentence part is a "chunk" of meaning in the sentence.

- 1. Read each pair of sentences a chunk (sentence part) at a time.
- 2. Copy the sentence that makes sense because it is divided into meaningful chunks.

EXAMPLE -----

Sentences:

- a. The / idea of cutting and sewing a / dress by / herself was novel and exciting.
- b. The idea / of cutting and sewing a dress / by herself / was novel and exciting.

Elizabeth George Speare, The Witch of Blackbird Pond

Correct: b

- 1a. They walked into / the bull / ring in the bright daylight of five / o'clock.
- 1b. They walked / into the bull ring / in the bright daylight / of five o'clock.

Maia Wojciechowska, Shadow of a Bull

- 2a. Sixteen children / and young people / were stricken with the mysterious fever, / and none of the familiar remedies / seemed to be of any benefit.
- 2b. Sixteen children and young / people were stricken with the mysterious / fever, and none of the familiar / remedies seemed to be of any / benefit.

Elizabeth George Speare, The Witch of Blackbird Pond

- 3a. The next day after / school, Jess went down and got the lumber he / needed, carrying it a couple of / boards at a time to the / creek bank.
- 3b. The next day after school, / Jess went down / and got the lumber he needed, / carrying it a couple of boards at a time / to the creek bank.

Katherine Paterson, Bridge to Terabithia

- 4a. When the / people in Central / Park learned that one of / the toy sailboats was being steered by a mouse in / a sailor suit, they / all came running.
- 4b. When the people / in Central Park / learned that one of the toy sailboats / was being steered by a mouse / in a sailor suit, / they all came running.

E. B. White, Stuart Little

- 5a. I saw / a gray-green slimy thing / like a snail / without its shell, / only bigger, / the size of a rat.
- 5b. I saw a / gray-green slimy / thing like a snail without / its shell, only / bigger, the / size of a rat.

K. A. Applegate, Animorphs: The Invasion

Practice 2: Chunking to Imitate

- 1. The slash marks (/) in the model divide the sentence into chunks.
- 2. Copy and divide the imitation sentence into the same chunks.

EXAMPLE -

Model:

Harriet started, / very slowly, / heart pounding, / to pull the ropes of the dumbwaiter / that would start her downward.

Louise Fitzhugh, Harriet the Spy

Imitation:

Jackson walked, / most confidently, / smile spreading, / to receive the award for the spelling contest / that had challenged the contestants constantly.

1a. MODEL: Then he turned / and stood still, / with the sun at his back, / and studied the water again.

Gary Paulsen, Hatchet

- 1b. IMITATION: Now Harriet nodded and became interested, with the Internet on her screen, and examined the web site thoroughly.
- 2a. MODEL: Pieces of tree, / pieces of metal, / pieces of seat and airplane wing / gleamed in the moonlight.

Caroline B. Cooney, Flight #116 Is Down

- 2b. IMITATION: Stories of courage, stories of suspense, stories of adventure and romance remained in the child's memory.
- 3a. MODEL: Crossing the lawn that morning, / Douglas Spaulding / broke a spider web with his face / when a single invisible line on the air / touched his brow / and snapped without a sound.

Ray Bradbury, Dandelion Wine

- 3b. IMITATION: Frying his body all day, Jacob Johnson got a horrible sunburn by afternoon because the cheap suntan lotion from his brother became a thin liquid and dripped into the sand.
- 4a. MODEL: Every sort of animal, / from bears to black beetles, / came sporting or shambling or scurrying / along their way, / and the high sky / that had been as sandy and arid as the soil itself, / now blossomed with birds.

Peter S. Beagle, The Last Unicorn

4b. IMITATION: All kinds of vegetables, from celery to fresh tomatoes, were laughing or dancing or playing in the salad bowl, and the salad dressing that had been as quiet and unnoticed as the bowl itself, suddenly giggled with glee.

Practice 3: Chunking to Imitate

- 1. Copy the model sentence.
- 2. Copy the only sentence in the pair underneath the model that imitates the model.
- 3. Draw slash marks (/) to show the chunks like the ones in the model.

EXAMPLE -----

Model:

He was in the bushes in moments, / scattering the birds, / grabbing branches, / stripping them to fill his mouth with berries.

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Gary Paulsen, Hatchet

Sentences:

- a. The firemen ran up the stairwell, entered the third floor to evacuate the apartments, and directed people to the safest exit.
- b. Dad was on the riding mower in the afternoon, cutting the grass, bagging clippings, mulching them to cover his plantings for protection.

Chunks Like Model: b

Dad was on the riding mower in the afternoon, / cutting the grass, / bagging clippings, / mulching them to cover his plantings for protection.

MODEL ONE: With Miss Turner's map, / I found the first stone wall / that marked the farm.

Jean Craighead George, My Side of the Mountain

1a. In the final inning, Juan caught the home run ball that won the game.

1b. After the alarm was turned off, he got up and went to get ready for school.

MODEL TWO: The head was ugly, / a slag heap of melted-looking, / black pebbled skin.

K. A. Applegate, Animorphs: The Attack

- 2a. Ahead the road curved, turning very suddenly and dangerously, almost like the letter u.
- 2b. Our discovery was amazing, a treasure chest of expensive-appearing, golden dazzling jewels.

MODEL THREE: The fox coughed, / gagged, / and sneezed, / and the Stinky Cheese Man / flew off his back / and into the river, / where he fell apart.

Jon Scieszka, "The Stinky Cheese Man"

- 3a. A droid slid, bent, and fell, and the Jedi warrior climbed down the hill and into the desert, where the droid lay broken.
- 3b. The jungle was dark, dense, and scary, but Tarzan, near the waterfall in the rain forest, swung from the vines to save the gorillas.

Practice 4: Unscrambling to Imitate

- 1. Unscramble both lists of sentence parts to imitate the same model.
- 2. Imitate the arrangement of sentence parts in the model.

EXAMPLE -

Model to Imitate:

There was water to draw and linen to scrub, and, everlastingly, the endless rows of vegetables to weed and hoe.

Elizabeth George Speare, The Witch of Blackbird Pond

Lists:

- a. and trash to haul
- b. and, especially the weekly list of chores to start and complete
- c. there was grass to mow
- a. and games to play
- b. and, always, the exciting seasonal sports to play and enjoy
- c. there was music to hear

Imitations:

There was grass to mow and trash to haul, and, especially, the weekly list of chores to start and complete.

There was music to hear and games to play, and, always, the exciting seasonal sports to play and enjoy.

FIRST MODEL: When a child loves you for a long, long time, you become real. Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

- 1a. gave the forecast for blue, blue skies
- 1b. the weather turned nasty
- 1c. while the weatherman
- 2a. the gorillas became worried

2b. as the tiger

2c. chased Tarzan with fast, fast, strides

SECOND MODEL: When the bell rang for recess, he put on his red jacket and walked outside, alone.

Louis Sachar, There's a Boy in the Girl's Bathroom

3a. delighted

3b. after the daffodils appeared in spring

3c. and worked outdoors

3d. Grandma got out her gardening tools

4a. and went downstairs

4b. because the puppy whimpered at night

4c. concerned

4d. Sandy rose from the bed

Practice 5: Unscrambling and Imitating

- 1. Unscramble the list of sentence parts to imitate the model.
- 2. Write your own imitation of the model.

EXAMPLE -

Model to Imitate:

While everyone scattered, I crept into my favorite hiding place, the little closet tucked under the stairs.

Jean Fritz, Homesick: My Own Story

Scrambled Sentence Parts:

- a. a temporary tent made from a cardboard box
- b. Levar came out from the shelter
- c. when the rain ended

Unscrambled Sentence:

When the rain ended, Levar came out from the shelter, a temporary tent made from a cardboard box.

Sample Imitation:

After the light changed, the bus arrived at everybody's favorite restaurant, a huge building packed with hungry tourists.

1. MODEL: Four dolphins, swimming side by side, were pushing the raft through the water.

Arthur C. Clarke, Dolphin Island

a. were playing tug-of-war with a banana

b. tumbling over each other

c. baby chimpanzees

2. MODEL: They parted the bushes on the bank and peered out over the water. Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

- a. and raced back toward the starting gate
- b. rounded the corner of the track
- c. the horses

3. MODEL: The third girl, holding her own mirror, used an eyebrow pencil to give herself a heavy brow.

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Beverly Cleary, Ramona and Her Father

- a. used the tractor to give the soil a good tilling
- b. renewing the school's agricultural field
- c. the high school students

4. MODEL: Alan and Tom and Joe leaned on their shovels under a tree in the apple orchard, watching the worms they had dug squirming on a flat rock.

Thomas Rockwell, How to Eat Fried Worms

- a. in the frightful land of Dorothy's imagination
- b. prowling the territory they had traveled searching for a fresh victim
- c. lions and tigers and bears roamed through the forest

Practice 6: Combining to Imitate

- 1. Combine both lists of sentences to imitate the same model.
- 2. Change the first sentence into the first sentence part of the model, change the second sentence into the second sentence part of the model, etc.

EXAMPLE

Model to Imitate:

She loved to stroke the little pig, to feed him, to put him to bed.

E. B. White, Charlotte's Web

Lists:

a. Natalie wanted to do several things.

- b. She wanted to conduct scientific experiments.
- c. She wanted to learn physics.
- d. She wanted to put science to work.
- a. Wilson liked to do several things.
- b. He liked to plant the garden.
- c. He liked to remove each new weed.
- d. He liked to have soil to till.

Imitations:

Natalie wanted to conduct scientific experiments, to learn physics, to put science to work.

Wilson liked to plant the garden, to remove each new weed, to have soil to till.

FIRST MODEL: He had some mouthwash, horrible stuff his mother made him gargle with when he had a cold.

Lynne Reid Banks, The Return of the Indian

1a. She had a jump rope.

1b. It was an exercise tool her doctor wanted her to use.

1c. The doctor wanted her to use it when she was strengthening her legs.

2a. Ralph had one brother.

2b. The brother was a neat kid Ralph's friends liked.

2c. Ralph's friends liked the brother when they played baseball.

SECOND MODEL: Once upon a time in a house by the sea lay an old woman, a special old woman who had the gift of magic.

Lois Duncan, A Gift of Magic

- 3a. Hidden in a cave near the castle on the mountain was a crystal ball.
- 3b. The crystal ball was a remarkable crystal ball.

3c. It was a crystal ball which showed a fantasy world in color.

4a. Once at the beach by our house on the cliff appeared a surfer.

4b. The surfer was an amazingly old surfer.

4c. The surfer was one who had a touch of eternal youth.

Practice 7: Combining and Imitating

- 1. Combine the list of sentences to imitate the model.
- 2. Write your own imitation of the model.

EXAMPLE -

Model to Imitate:

There they stood in their roomy ox stalls, clean and sleek and gleaming brown, with long black manes and tails.

Laura Ingalls Wilder, Farmer Boy

Sentences to Combine:

- a. There they danced in the large multi-purpose room.
- b. They were young and nervous but very excited.
- c. They were with new pretty shirts and dresses.

Combination:

There they danced in the large multi-purpose room, young and nervous but very excited, with new pretty shirts and dresses.

Sample Imitation:

Soon the stars appeared in the huge theater lobby, glamorous and dashing and super confident, with constant perky smiles and laughter.

1. MODEL: Because he was so small, Stuart was often hard to find around the house.

E. B. White, *Stuart Little*

a. It happened when the train was very late.

b. Then passengers were usually easy to spot.

c. They could be spotted in the restaurant.

2. MODEL: Outside, the lights of towns and villages flickered in the distance as the Polar Express raced northward.

Chris Van Allsburg, The Polar Express

a. It happened nearby.

b. The exhibits of computers and printers filled with crowds.

c. This happened because the sale prices lowered further.

3. MODEL: The king gripped the arms of his chair, closed his eyes, clenched his teeth, and sweated.

T. H. White, *Book of Merlyn*

a. Our dog dragged a big bone in its jaws.

b. It jumped the little fence.

c. It dropped the bone.

d. And it panted.

4. MODEL: From the earliest times, rats lived around the edges of human cities and farms, stowed away on men's ships, gnawed holes in their floors and stole their food.

Robert C. O'Brien, Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH

a. It happened in the warm seashore air.

b. Seagulls flocked toward the food of wasteful residents and tourists.

c. They lunched on leftovers on beaches.

d. They picked crumbs from the sand.

e. And they ate garbage.

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Dedicated to Teachers

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