



Chapter Five

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Sentence Structure

How does knowledge of sentence structure help students understand the purpose of texts?

When asking students to define a sentence a common response is that it has a capital letter and a full stop. As Collerson (1997) points out, this is a graphological definition which doesn't necessarily help students make decisions when writing. The definition does not help them see the complexities amongst ideas within sentences when reading either. Sometimes sentences are discussed as complete ideas but even this is difficult to articulate, as students read and produce more complex texts. In thinking about a grammatical definition of a sentence, the notion of a clause becomes important as clauses are combined in a range of ways, depending on the purpose of the text. The use of one clause or combination of clauses determines the types of sentences constructed. A sentence may be described as simple, compound or complex. (See Derewianka, 1998:93–101).

It is not uncommon for teaching about sentence structure to focus on accuracy in particular, however, exploring choices in relation to the purposes of texts at both the sentence and clause level can include a focus on how we can make and develop meanings throughout texts. In taking this approach we can consider types of sentences and how they develop meaning for a reader rather than assuming that effective texts always have a variety of sentence types. For example, some texts only consist of simple sentences yet are highly effective. For instance in narrative texts there may be times when simple sentences are used to convey fast-paced action. On the other hand, we may have complex sentences containing adjectival clauses to



assist in describing character and setting at various stages in the text. We may also find complexity when a writer uses dialogue to convey both character and events.

When working with teachers a frequent comment from them is that students tend to write the way they speak, constructing 'run-on' sentences. This is understandable as students bring their oral language to the written mode. As with all grammatical resources we can look at how sentence structure differs between oral and written texts. This needs to be pointed out explicitly through the use of metalanguage.

What do you need to know about sentence structure?

In order to develop metalanguage for thinking and talking about sentence structure choices, it is informative to look at student writing to consider how explicit discussion might enhance writing choices. The following sample text, 'Mr and Mrs Small', which was written by a student, has been broken up showing each clause on a new line. The verbal groups have been underlined.

Mr and Mrs Small, Geoff and Sue set off on their fishing trip.

Mr Small said

this would be the best holiday ever.

Sue spotted their holiday cabin near the lake.

The lake was crystal clear.

Mr and Mrs Small unpacked

and put their clothes away in the cabin.

When initially reading this text we can see accurate construction of sentences with punctuation evident however the text does have a spoken-like quality. The text is the beginning or orientation of a narrative. Overall the structure is good as the characters and setting are introduced, however, we can see that there is limited development of setting and character. In fact on close observation, the names and number of characters seems ambiguous.

If we look at the sentence structure we start to see that the text consists mainly of simple sentences. The text has one compound sentence due to the combination of independent clauses. An **independent clause** is one that can stand alone. It is worth noting that the clauses are joined by *and*. A spoken-like feel has resulted with limited scope for the development of details about the characters and setting. There is one example of a complex sentence in which reported speech has been used with

the use of the saying verb *said* in the reporting clause, establishing a dependent clause as it cannot stand alone – ‘Mr Small *said* this *would be* the best holiday ever’. The text is heavily events-based with the use of action verbs such as, *spotted*, *put*, *unpacked* etc. and there are two examples of relating verbs *would be* and *was* which aid the development of description. However, there is little development of extended noun groups. Due to the lack of ideas and complexity, engagement by the audience is limited. By pointing such features out to students we can start a conversation about ways of developing the text further. Already we can see that defining a sentence as having a capital letter and a full stop isn’t going to assist students in developing either knowledge and understanding or skills for creating and extending narrative text and engaging an audience.

In order to understand and talk about sentence structure we need to be able to identify the verbal groups in the text and understand the clause boundaries. A clause is about something and is made up of groups with the main element being a **verbal group**. This tells the ‘goings on’ in a sentence. Most clauses contain one or more other groups such as noun groups, adverbials, conjunctions / connectives making connections between clauses and sentences. The clause or clauses combine into sentences. Independent clauses can stand alone, in that they can make sense on their own and have a capital letter and full stop. In contrast **dependent clauses** need an independent clause in order to make a sentence. The dependent clauses function to elaborate on the main clause. For example:

TABLE 7: INDEPENDENT AND DEPENDENT CLAUSES			
Types of sentences	Structure	Example	Clause types
Simple	one independent clause	The lake was crystal clear.	independent
Compound	two or more independent clauses	Mr and Mrs Small unpacked and put their clothes away in the cabin and then went swimming in the lake	independent independent independent
Complex	a combination of independent and dependent clauses	Mr Small said this would be the best holiday ever. Although the lake was crystal clear the atmosphere was dark and murky.	independent dependent independent



How can knowledge of sentence structure be used to develop ideas, setting and characterisation?

It is not enough to just assess student writing and provide general feedback. We also need to convey to students how to develop their writing further. By supporting students with the insertion of relative pronouns we empower students to add detail through the use of adjectival clauses. Relative pronouns can include *who*, *which* and *that*. This serves to extend the noun group and consequently build description. For example:

the scarlet dress *that* she wore on special occasions
the guilty child *who* taunted her mother

By placing conjunctions like *as* and *although* (See Derewianka, 1998:96) at the beginning of a sentence or between clauses we create dependent clauses, which can elaborate meanings about time, manner, cause and concession. As a result a text can have an increased use of complex sentences and potential development of ideas, character and setting. Consider how the 'Mr and Mrs Small' text could be developed with additions supported by the insertion of conjunctions and relative pronouns.

Mr and Mrs Small, Geoff and Sue

who _____

set off on their fishing trip.

Mr Small said

this would be the best holiday ever.

As Sue spotted their holiday cabin near the lake _____ .

Although the lake was crystal clear _____.

In looking at student writing, the aim is not necessarily to develop more complex sentences but to develop a greater sense of ideas, character and setting. In this text this can be achieved through the use of dependent clauses as adjectival clauses extending noun groups, and the use of conjunctions to develop dependent clauses to enhance description of both character and setting.

In addition, non-finite verbs such as those ending with 'ing' can be very useful in establishing complex sentences. Non-finite verbs are those that don't have a subject or tense and cannot have a modal such as *could* or *must* in front of them. Such verbs



may go at the beginning of the sentence to set up a dependent clause in the first position or at the beginning of additional clauses. For example:

<u>Shimmering</u> in the sunshine,	(dependent)
the lake was crystal clear.	(independent)
Mr and Mrs Small unpacked	(independent)
and <u>put</u> their clothes away in the cabin	(independent)
<u>wondering</u> what they should do next	(dependent)

In looking at this example we can also consider how changing the order of the clauses might affect the reader and shift attention as placing the last clause in first position would place the emphasis on what the characters were thinking rather than doing. The choices made depend on the meaning the writer is trying to construct and can have a powerful impact on the way ideas are developed through description and how events unfold.

When thinking about the purposes of a range of literary texts we can start to think about how the development of sentence structures across a text at certain stages can assist in the text achieving its purpose. For example in literary recounts complex sentences may be developed with the use of conjunctions such as *after, before, until* and so on as they set up dependent clauses and result in greater development of ideas across the text. Similarly review texts might have features in terms of complex sentences but focus more on the use of conjunctions showing cause and concession, for example *since, so, even though, whereas* or *despite* as they assist in setting up structures to evaluate.

How can we use literary texts to develop knowledge about sentence structure to improve student writing?

Reading and sharing quality literature, both text-based and multimodal, can serve to develop student understanding of a range of grammatical features in order to critically analyse choices made in texts. The use of texts that have been made into movies is particularly useful as choices can be considered based on the written mode and compared to the audio / visual mode. The use of the children's picture book *The Peasant Prince*, based on the novel *Mao's Last Dancer* and the movie is an example of this. In the case to follow, the language choices in the picture book were compared to the meanings portrayed in the movie trailer (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPM-tmT9sV8>).



When showing the beginning of the movie trailer, prior to reading the book, students can note the setting of the movie and how it changes from China to the United States.

In replaying the trailer students can identify the way the events are shown. As with most movie trailers the events are shown in short sharp bursts. This fits with the purpose of the trailer in that it gives the viewer a brief synopsis of the movie whilst also gaining the attention of the viewer. Students can identify the events and related action verbs. It is also appropriate to talk about whether the events would occur in the past, present or future tense and point out the use of irregular verbs. After this students can be asked if the 'visual' events would be best represented in the written form using simple, compound or complex sentences. Students tend to say simple sentences with action verbs would be most effective due to the focus on action through numerous events as the audio and visual elements add the descriptive information in the trailer.

From this point students can be shown the book *The Peasant Prince* and asked to predict the relationship between the book and the movie. It is worth noting that it is a narrative based on the true story of Li Cunxin who is both the writer and main character in the book. Both during and after reading the book it can be noted that there are a variety of sentence structures used. Both the written and visual text can be compared to the short bursts of action in the trailer. By looking at sections of text in the book, discussion can evolve around how the choice of sentence types differs according to the author's purpose at particular points in the text. When comparing the orientation with events in the complication we can see a contrast between the use of simple sentences to establish characters and setting as opposed to a greater range of sentence types as events and feelings are evaluated. This evaluation is achieved through elaboration by building not only noun groups but also more complex sentences as can be seen in the following excerpt from the book.

ORIENTATION STAGE FROM *THE PEASANT PRINCE*

Sometime ago, in a remote village in northern China, a small peasant boy lived with his parents and six brothers in a tiny brick house. (simple)

They were very poor. (simple)

On the bleak farming lands around his village, the boy would often fly a homemade kite. (simple)

It was a gift from his beloved father. (simple)

COMPLICATION STAGE FROM THE PEASANT PRINCE

Before I knew it,
 my new life had begun. (complex)
 I was plunged into my first days at the Beijing Dance Academy. (simple)
 They were long and hard and bewildering. (simple)
 I was one of the worst students,
 and I felt so shy,
lost in an ocean of loneliness. (complex)
 I missed my mother,
 and every night I sobbed myself to sleep. (compound)
 Sometimes I would find a place
to hide amongst the weeping willows. (complex)
 The dripping leaves quivered
 as my tears fell,
 as if the trees themselves understood my sadness. (complex)

By discussing how elaboration can build emotion in a text, students can see how to manipulate sentence structure in their own writing. In showing students just the images at the end of the book, but before reading the final part of the book students can write their own resolution and share by discussing sentence structure choices. Students can discuss their choice of a range of sentence types versus making choices involving less variety. Their choices can then be compared with those made by the author. It is the knowledge and metalanguage that is developed that can assist students to critically analyse their own choices.

A classroom experience: A teacher shares her expertise about sentence structure

Melinda Phillips

SCHOOL AND CLASS CONTEXT

The following activities have come from a unit written for a Year 5 class in a South Western Sydney school. The class consisted of 29 students with a significant majority of students coming from non-English speaking backgrounds and a low socio-economic status community.

PEDAGOGICAL CHOICES

This unit of work was based on the picture book *The Princess' Blankets* (Duffy, 2009). The book is in the form of a fairy tale with the written text interpreted through a series of



paintings by the artist Catherine Hyde. It is about a princess who always feels cold and never gets out of bed. This text was chosen as it provides a meaningful resource for the study of particular grammatical features that are common to the narrative text type. As the language in the book is quite complex the focus on grammar was aimed at assisting students to comprehend the meanings within the text. Specifically, this unit addressed verb groups, clause combinations, noun groups, pronoun references as a cohesive device, as well as figurative and evaluative language.

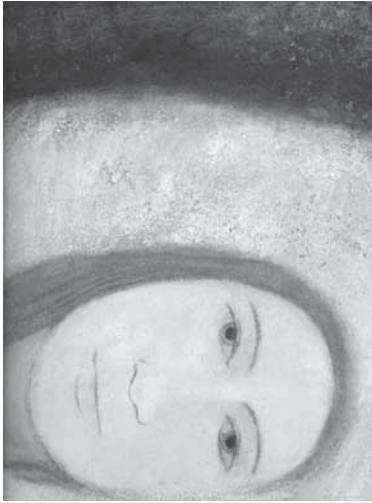
These grammatical elements were chosen as they provide pivotal resources for authors to make choices which assist them to achieve the social purpose of the narrative genre. The unit has a strong focus on critical literacy, by encouraging students to explicitly identify choices made by authors to influence them as readers, and providing opportunities for students to practise these skills and strategies themselves as writers.

The following sequence focuses in particular on identifying and combining clauses in order to explicitly teach students about sentence structure and how meanings amongst clauses are related.

CONTROLLED SUPPORT

The students had already read the book prior to this lesson and had looked at action, thinking, saying and feeling verbs across the text. They focused particularly on how the author's choice of saying and feeling verbs told the reader about the characters involved.

In this lesson students were introduced to the definition of a clause as a complete message or idea containing a verb or verb group. As the idea of a clause was very new it was decided that prior to reading the book some of the paintings from the book would be shown and students were asked to describe what they could see happening in the picture. This was modelled first. For example *The Princess stayed sleeping in her bed*. Students' responses were recorded on butcher's paper. This idea was adapted from Derewianka (1998:11) where she uses an image of bears in a kitchen to explain the components of a clause. In the case of the Princess we can see that the verb group (stayed sleeping) is the heart of the clause telling the doing or happening, the noun group (the Princess) names who or what is taking part and the adverbial (in her bed) adds more information to the verb by indicating the circumstances under which the action occurred. As students responded, they were asked questions such as, 'What is happening?' and 'Who is taking part?'. When their ideas contained adverbials they were asked either 'Where? When? How? or Why?' the action happened.



Examples of clauses developed after reading the text and looking at the image:

The Princess lay quietly.

The Princess felt sad.

The Princess was still cold.

The terms **verb group**, **noun group** and **adverbial** were used explicitly with the students. Once students could see that these were the parts of ideas or chunks of meaning, the term **clause** was introduced. We all discussed how their ideas tended to be just one clause and whether some of the ideas could be combined with the use of conjunctions, for example 'The princess stayed sleeping in her bed *while* the stranger watched her'.

This was a useful way to help students to start thinking about what a clause is and how they can be put together. It gave them a chance to recall their knowledge of the book by referring not only to the images but drawing on their background language and knowledge. This strategy also helps in moving students from their oral language towards more written-like language.

GUIDED SUPPORT

After re-reading the book and pointing out some examples where many ideas or clauses were combined the first page was displayed. This was again read to the class, using pausing, intonation and phrasing carefully to emphasise the chunks of meaning represented by each element or clause of the sentences. The challenge for students in reading the text was the abundance of complex sentences and so to gain optimum meaning the relationship between ideas needed to be clear. For example,

Her mother, the Queen, instructed that the Princess was always to be dressed in the heaviest fleeces and the warmest woollens but, despite the fact every dressmaker in the land stitched and sewed far into the night, and that whole flocks of sheep shivered fleeceless out in their fields, the Princess stayed cold.



In sentences such as this we identified the chunks that made sense together. We found it helpful, in this exercise, looking at the verb or action and then looking at who was involved. However, we found this was problematic when identifying that the mother or Queen was instructing but it wasn't clear as to who was being instructed. We needed to read the previous sentences where the royal servants were mentioned. After looking at the chunks we colour-coded those that made sense on their own (independent clauses) and those that need to work with other clauses (dependent clauses). It was found that getting students to read text aloud so they could hear if the clause sounded like a complete message that didn't need any further information, worked best.

After this we looked at the range of conjunctions used to make connections between clauses. Conjunctions such as *but*, *despite*, *although* and *if* were common throughout the book and form dependent clauses conveying concession or condition (Derewianka, 1998:96). As these formed dependent clauses it was critical to discuss the function of such conjunctions and how they made connections between the clauses.

Throughout discussion students were encouraged to comment on why the author had combined clauses in such a way, and how they contributed to the meaning of the text. The following questions were then asked to elicit meaningful responses from the students (taken from Derewianka, 1998:92):

Who is doing the action?

Who is being affected by the action?

Who is the initiator?

Who is playing a more passive role?

Why is the writer telling us about the thoughts/feelings of a particular character?

What does this tell us about the character?

The outcome of asking such questions was that the princess wasn't involved in action very often but rather actions by others occurred around her. Also although actions were occurring around her, they had no effect on her as she always remained cold. This can lead to looking at how princesses are typically portrayed in a range of fairy tales and what this tells about the time, place and culture in which tales are produced. Without looking at the verbs and nouns or actions and actors or doers and how the happenings were related across the clauses, we would not have been able to explore the meanings in an in-depth manner and tease out how the meanings within the very complex sentences related to each other. To further develop understandings each message or clause can be illustrated or rewritten in more spoken-like language. This results in the run-on sentence and less sophisticated use of conjunctions and



dependent clauses to make meaning but the process helps to give students access to the complex meanings. For example:

The queen told the royal servants what to do **so** the royal servants made sure the Princess was always wearing warm clothes **and because of this** all the dressmakers were sewing until late every night **and** all the sheep were cold **because** they didn't have any wool left **but** the Princess was still cold.

INDEPENDENT SUPPORT

After guiding students and encouraging them to take on the metalanguage to discuss the meanings, they worked with their peers in small groups to identify examples of simple, compound and complex sentences in another text extract from the book. Students focused on complex sentences and represented each idea visually or in their own words. After doing this they explained what happened in their part of the text to another group. This was an important step as it helped students to unpack the 'written-like' literary language into more 'spoken-like' language. This enhanced their understanding of the overall meaning of the book but also the relationship between the intricate chunks of meaning in and across sentences.

How does knowledge about sentence structure develop writing and higher order reading skills?

Talking about meanings and relationships not only at a clause and sentence level but also critically analysing and challenging choices, provides a way in to accessing complex meanings and development of in-depth classroom discussion. Gradual release of support and provision of opportunities for students to work collaboratively in the classroom is communicative and draws upon student background knowledge and experiences. As students take on metalanguage they actually scaffold each other.

The best way to build up student knowledge of sentence structure, how it works and how choices can enhance meanings is through reading a wide range of quality literature whilst also reflecting on their own writing choices. We need rich texts to show how authors craft language to engage readers and thus achieve their purposes. By discussing the ways clauses have been combined into sentences or indeed separated in modelled texts students can start to discuss and view the choices they make in their own written texts, leading to empowerment over the language.