

Teaching Grammar  
in a  
Meaningful Context  
Part One

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## **Teaching Grammar in Context**

from Don Killgallon's *Sentence Composing for Middle School*)

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When students practice these four steps with sentences from literature, they will not be able to help learning grammatical constructions and good writing at the same time.

I use these steps with sentences from the books we're reading, but I also use sentences from my students' own writing. Plus, students are doing a lot of writing as they take part in these exercises. They will imitate good writing, put many sentences together, and write their own sentence parts to expand existing sentences.

### Unscramble

We spend a little time talking about how to break a sentence into meaningful chunks.

Then we spend most of our time putting those chunks back together to make a sentence.

Sometimes students come up with a totally new order, something that still makes sense as a sentence, but I wouldn't have thought of it if I were just looking at an answer key.

### Imitate

As we practice unscrambling, we gather more familiarity with the grammatical constructions in the separate chunks. Then students are ready to imitate and create their own new sentences by following a model. Students will create their own sentences to follow a particular pattern.

### Combine

Students practice decombining and combining. We practice breaking apart a long sentence into shorter sentences. We also look at shorter sentences which can be combined to form longer, more effective sentences. Students begin to understand the effects of putting a dependent clause here or a participial phrase there.

### Expand

Finally, students are able to take a short sentence and add parts to make it more effective. If our focus is participial phrases, I'll give students a list of sentences and ask them to add a participial phrase in a particular place. Students are now ready to put these grammar skills to use in their own writing.

I created the following grammar exercises using passages from novels my students read.

The grammar work is based on exercises created by Don Killgallon.

Answers and original text appear at the end of the packet.

## UNSCRAMBLE:

Unscramble the eight sentences which form this paragraph from Sharon Creech's *Walk Two Moons*. Put them back together in a meaningful order, which might not be the same order as the original. Next decide how to order the sentences to re-form the paragraph.

1. in the breeze / waving / no bird / I saw / only leaves
2. the most beautiful birdsong / of that tree / I heard / when I was younger / coming from the top
3. that tree / I passed / I listened / every time
4. itself / at the leaves / that it was the tree / I stared up / it seemed / the longer / the more  
that was singing
5. a call / with trills and warbles / a true birdsong / it was not / it was
6. hoping / beneath that tree / of the bird / who was singing / to catch sight / such a song / I stood /  
for the longest time
7. beside the barn / a tall aspen / next to my favorite sugar maple tree / is
8. sometimes it did not / I always called it / sometimes / the singing tree / it sang / but from then on

## IMITATE #1:

The model sentence below has two imitations. Unscramble the imitations. (One makes sense. The other is nonsense.) You should be able to match the chunks in each sentence to the chunks in the model.

MODEL: I stood / beneath that tree / for the longest time /  
hoping / to catch sight / of the bird / who was singing / such a song.

1. who was swimming / from his neighborhood / with the greatest courage / lunging / he ran /  
to reach the girl / such a stroke / into the ocean
2. for their coach / to feel pride / under their toothbrushes / trying / who was wagging /  
with the biggest smiles / such a tail / the eggs flopped

## IMITATE #2:

In this passage from *The Pearl*, highlight each of the following:

1. a sentence with more than one adverb clause
2. a sentence with inverted word order
3. a sentence with a series of infinitive phrases

The brothers, as they walked along, squinted their eyes a little, as they and their grandfather and their great-grandfathers had done for four hundred years, since first the strangers came with argument and authority and gunpowder to back up both. And in the four hundred years Kino's people had learned only one defense--a slight slitting of the eyes and a slight tightening of the lips and a retirement. Nothing could break down this wall, and they could remain whole within the wall.

The gathering procession was solemn, for they sensed the importance of this day, and any children who showed a tendency to scuffle, to scream, to cry out, to steal hats and rumple hair, were hissed to silence by their elders. So important was this day that an old man came to see, riding on the shoulders of his nephew. The procession left the brush huts and entered the stone and plaster city where the streets were a little wider and there were narrow pavements beside the buildings.

Write each sentence you highlighted. Then write an imitation of each sentence.

## COMBINE #1:

Decombine the following sentences.

1. The brothers, as they walked along, squinted their eyes a little, as they and their grandfather and their great-grandfathers had done for four hundred years, since first the strangers came with argument and authority and gunpowder to back up both.

John Steinbeck, *The Pearl*

2. John Thornton was eating dinner when Buck dashed into camp and sprang upon him in a frenzy of affection, overturning him, scrambling upon him, licking his face, biting his hand—"playing the general tom-fool" as John Thornton characterized it, the while he shook Buck back and forth and cursed him lovingly.

Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*

3. When the other two had trotted down the beach to look back at the mountain he had followed them for a few yards and then stopped.

William Golding, *The Lord of the Flies*

## COMBINE #2:

Combine the following pairs of sentences into just one sentence by making the underlined portion part of the first sentence. In some cases, you might also choose to eliminate other parts of the first sentence. Sentences are taken from *Walk Two Moons*, by Sharon Creech.

1. We had dinner at the Finneys. It was an experience.
2. When we arrived, Mary Lou's brothers were running around like crazed animals. They were jumping over the furniture and tossing footballs.
3. Mary Lou's older sister was named Maggie. She was talking on the telephone and plucking her eyebrows at the same time.
4. Mr. Finney was cooking something in the kitchen. He enlisted the help of four-year-old Tommy.
5. Phoebe whispered something to me. She whispered, "I am not too optimistic about the possibilities of this meal."



## Killgallon's steps

**Unscramble** Take a sentence from something you are reading with your students.  
Break it into chunks and scramble the chunks.

two mongrel dogs  
in the rain  
an old man  
of disproportionate size  
whose black face  
in the relaxed early-evening avenue  
as wet pebbles  
shines golden-brown  
under the streetlamp  
is walking

**Imitate** Ask your students to write an imitation of the patterns in the sentence they just unscrambled. Or give them a new set of sentences, broken into chunks, and ask them to imitate the patterns. They can write sentences that make sense, or they can write nonsense imitations.

So we beat on/boats against the current/borne back ceaselessly/into the past.

And they move forward/planes into the wind/ground back endlessly/toward the terminal.  
But he carries on/fly in the ointment/speeding off always/into bad traffic.

**Combine** Give your students a de-combined sentence from literature and ask them to make the simple sentences into one larger sentence. They'll have coordinate and subordinate to make it work. They'll practice using transitions.

God holds you over the pit of hell.  
Sometimes a person holds a spider over the fire.  
Sometimes a person holds some loathsome insect over the fire.  
God abhors you.  
God is dreadfully provoked.

**Expand** Give your students a new sentence with part of it missing. Put a slash mark in the place of the missing part. Ask students to write their own specific grammatical construction to fit in that space. Make them write out the entire new sentence.

Add an adverb clause.  
/, the wind died, and the clearing was quiet again.

Add a participial phrase.  
Lennie knelt down and drank, /.

## More Killgallon-inspired ideas:

- For whatever grammar work you're doing,  
**always pull sentences from the reading you're doing at the time.**

### PLACEMENT OF ADVERBS:

Slowly, painfully, the man began to move through the placid water.

Here, we can play with the idea of putting adverbs in different places. How does that affect meaning?  
How does it affect the flow of the sentence or the emphasis that is placed at the beginning or at the end?

- **Have students find their own sentences.**

Always have students find their own sentences. You might start by asking them to find ones that they like. Collect them on the overhead or on sentence strips. Then analyze the grammar of the sentences. How does it affect us to read a simple sentence as opposed to a Faulknerian super-complex sentence? How do different types of verbs affect our understanding or reading experience?

- **Choose simple sentences that are long and still simple.** Surprise students with how long a simple sentence can be.

She'd loved her home so much, always had some project underway — wallpapering, painting, refinishing furniture. (*The Chocolate War*)

Goober put on the brakes, slackening his pace, coming finally to a halt. (*The Chocolate War*)

From Spitzbergen through the Arctic, and across Canada and the Barrens, he had held his own with all manner of dogs and achieved to mastery over them. (*The Call of the Wild*)

- **Have students combine simple sentences to form compound and complex sentences.**
- **Discuss the differences.** Sometimes a simple sentence works best for the situation. Sometimes compound or complex is a better choice. Talk about the effect of a different type of sentence on a literary or rhetorical situation.

from *As I Lay Dying*

I made it on the bevel.

1. There is more surface for the nails to grip.
2. There is twice the gripping-surface to each seam.
3. The water will have to seep into it on a slant. Water moves easiest up and down or straight across.
4. In a house people are upright two thirds of the time. So the seams and joints are made up-and-down. Because the stress is up-and-down.
5. In a bed where people lie down all the time, the joints and seams are made sideways, because the stress is sideways.
6. Except.
7. A body is not square like a crosstie.
8. Animal magnetism.
9. The animal magnetism of a dead body makes the stress come slanting, so the seams and joints of a coffin are made on the bevel.
10. You can see by an old grave that the earth sinks down on the bevel.
11. While in a natural hole, it sinks by the center, the stress being up-and-down.
12. So I made it on the bevel.
13. It makes a neater job.

# ANSWER KEY

## UNSCRAMBLE:

Here are the original sentences, in the order of the sentences of the grammar exercise.

1. I saw no bird only leaves waving in the breeze.
2. When I was younger, I heard the most beautiful birdsong coming from the top of that tree.
3. Every time I passed that tree, I listened.
4. The longer I stared up at the leaves, the more it seemed that it was the tree itself that was singing.
5. It was not a call; it was a true birdsong with trills and warbles.
6. I stood beneath that tree for the longest time, hoping to catch sight of the bird who was singing such a song.
7. Next to my favorite sugar maple tree beside the barn is a tall aspen.
8. Sometimes it sang, sometimes it did not, but from then on, I always called it the singing tree.

This is how the original paragraph reads in the book:

Next to my favorite sugar maple tree beside the barn is a tall aspen. When I was younger, I heard the most beautiful birdsong coming from the top of that tree. It was not a call; it was a true birdsong, with trills and warbles. I stood beneath that tree for the longest time, hoping to catch sight of the bird who was singing such a song. I saw no bird--only leaves waving in the breeze. The longer I stared up at the leaves, the more it seemed that it was the tree itself that was singing. Every time I passed that tree, I listened. Sometimes it sang, sometimes it did not, but from then on I always called it the singing tree.

Sharon Creech, *Walk Two Moons*

## IMITATE #1:

These really must be in the correct order.

MODEL: I stood / beneath that tree / for the longest time /hoping /  
to catch sight / of the bird / who was singing / such a song.

1. He ran / into the ocean / with the greatest courage /lunging /  
to reach the girl / from his neighborhood / who was swimming / such a stroke.
2. The eggs flopped / under their toothbrushes / with the biggest smiles /trying /  
to feel pride / for their coach / who was wagging / such a tail.

## IMITATE #2:

In this passage from *The Pearl*, highlight each of the following:

1. a sentence with more than one adverb clause
2. a sentence with inverted word order
3. a sentence with a series of infinitive phrases

1-The brothers, as they walked along, squinted their eyes a little, as they and their grandfather and their great-grandfathers had done for four hundred years, since first the strangers came with argument and authority and gunpowder to back up both. And in the four hundred years Kino's people had learned only one defense--a slight slitting of the eyes and a slight tightening of the lips and a retirement. Nothing could break down this wall, and they could remain whole within the wall.

3-The gathering procession was solemn, for they sensed the importance of this day, and any children who showed a tendency to scuffle, to scream, to cry out, to steal hats and rumple hair, were hissed to silence by their elders. 2-So important was this day that an old man came to see, riding on the shoulders of his nephew. The procession left the brush huts and entered the stone and plaster city where the streets were a little wider and there were narrow pavements beside the buildings.

Imitations will vary, but here are three examples:

1. The seedlings, while they waited impatiently, waved their petals a little, as they and their grandflowers and great-grandflowers had done for ten years, since first the gardeners came with plans and spades and peatmoss to back up both.
2. So special was this event that one tiny tree grew to reach, pushing on the edges of its root bag.
3. The waiting crowd was excited, for they knew the significance of this concert, and any ticket holders who revealed a desire to rest, to relax, to sit down, to bring chairs and set up camp, were shamed into conformity by the others.

## COMBINE #1:

Decombed sentences may vary.

1. The brothers walked along.  
They squinted their eyes a little.  
They and their grandfather and their great-grandfathers had squinted their eyes for four hundred years.  
They had started squinting when the strangers first came with argument and authority.  
The strangers came with gunpowder to back up their argument and authority.
2. John Thornton was eating dinner.  
Buck dashed into camp.  
He sprang upon Thornton in a frenzy of affection.  
He overturned Thornton.  
He scrambled upon him.  
He licked his face and bit his hand.  
He played the "general tom-fool."  
That's how John Thornton characterized it.  
Thornton shook Buck back and forth.  
He cursed Buck lovingly.

## COMBINE #2:

Here are the original sentences.

1. Dinner at the Finneys' was an experience.
2. When we arrived, Mary Lou's brothers were running around like crazed animals, jumping over the furniture and tossing footballs.
3. Mary Lou's older sister, Maggie, was talking on the telephone and plucking her eyebrows at the same time.
4. Mr. Finney was cooking something in the kitchen, with the help of four-year-old Tommy.
5. Phoebe whispered, "I am not too optimistic about the possibilities of this meal."

## COMBINE #3:

Here are the original sentences.

1. She made her way into the kitchen, trailing all three of them like a fishhook that has snagged a tangle of old tires and boots and other miscellaneous rubbish.
2. Everyone descended on the table in a chaotic flurry, knocking over glasses and sending forks onto the floor and picking up plates (which did not match, Phoebe pointed out to me) and saying, "That's my plate. I want the daisy plate," and "Give me the blue one! It's my turn for the blue plate."

## EXPAND:

Here are the original sentences.

### adding single word, or a series of words

1. \_\_\_\_\_ we didn't hear any more about the journals.
2. He took down the For Sale sign \_\_\_\_\_ and put up a For Rent sign.
3. Afterward, in the small silence, when no one commented on her pies, she gave a soft sigh and looked down at her plate.

### adding an adjective clause or phrase

4. The man with the bushy black hair was Mr. Birkway, our English teacher.
5. Mr. Birkway held the drawing in front of Beth Ann, who looked as if she might cry.
6. She used to tell me about the Black Hills, which were sacred to the Sioux Indians.

### adding an adverb clause

7. In the days that followed, as Dawson grew closer and closer, Buck still continued to interfere between Spitz and the culprits.
8. But he did it craftily
9. When the long winter nights come on and the wolves follow their meat into the lower valleys, he may be seen running at the head of the pack, through the pale moonlight or glimmering borealis, leaping gigantic above his fellows.

## Unscramble ANSWERS

from *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson

When his father, who was old and twisted with toil, made over to him the ownership of the farm and seemed content to creep away to a corner and wait for death, he shrugged his shoulders and dismissed the old man from his mind.

from “The Rainwalkers,” by Denise Levertov

An old man whose black face  
shines golden-brown as wet pebbles  
under the streetlamp, is walking  
two mongrel dogs of dis-  
proportionate size, in the rain,  
in the relaxed early-evening avenue.

## Imitate ANSWER

from *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

## Combine ANSWER

from “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” by Jonathan Edwards”

“The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked.”

## Expand ANSWER

from *Of Mice and Men*, by John Steinbeck

“As quickly as it had come, the wind died, and the clearing was quiet again.”  
Lennie “knelt down and drank, barely touching his lips to the water.”