

# Sentences: The Busy Bees of Text

Posted on [February 12, 2013](#) by [Ed View 360](#)

**By Nancy Hennessy**

I wonder how many of you conjured up images of yourself diagramming written sentences as you read the title of this blog. Some of you may have even cringed a bit (a hint of grammar sometimes has that effect).

I vividly recall Sister Marie Edwina's class and the innumerable sentences I diagrammed for English (the term language arts had yet to be coined). Assured of a good grade, this task was high on my list of academic favorites. However, unlike the author of *Sister Bernadette's Barking Dog: The Quirky History and the Lost Art of Diagramming Sentences*, I missed the point. Kitty Burns Florey (2006) got it, explaining "... once they were laid open, all their secrets explored—those sentences could be comprehended."

While diagramming itself may not play an essential role in your instruction, its goal—building an understanding of how parts of a sentence contribute to meaning—should.

## **The Importance of the Sentence**

The sentence lies at the heart of communicating thought and meaning, whether you are the writer or the reader. The rules of our language, syntax AKA grammar, allow for the creation of an infinite number of sentences that serve as the "worker bees of text" (Scott, 2004). The relationship that exists between syntax and semantics cannot be overlooked as educators work at developing students' reading and writing proficiency. Even the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), with a bit of detective work and inference, acknowledge a role for sentences in writing and comprehension.

## **Connections to Writing**

We, as teachers, recognize that writing proficiency is dependent on multiple processes and skills, and that the translation of ideas into syntactically correct form is central to conveying intended meaning. The nitty gritty aspects of parts of speech, the notorious sentence fragments, and the nuances of the simple, compound, and complex sentence are all too familiar to those who teach students how to write.

We have also had experiences with the havoc a sloppy sentence can wreak on the meaning of a composition. Many of us have worked with good writers who "know how to think about word order and its relationship with the ideas they are trying to express" (Scott, 2004). We also know struggling writers who often have difficulty using different syntactical structures to express relationships among words within and between sentences. An increasing emphasis on writing proficiency, including a student's ability to express understanding of reading, should prompt us to explicitly teach students how to translate thoughts and ideas into sentences.

## **Connections to Reading Comprehension**

Reading comprehension similarly demands the integration of multiple processes and skills, many of which overlap with writing. One critical component of language processing, necessary for constructing meaning, is the interpretation of sentences. As readers recognize and retrieve the

meaning of individual words, they also need to “work out the syntactic structure and sense of the sentence” (Cain, 2010).

As teachers, we have worked with “good readers” who know how to “work with the words” within sentences to identify the ideas and then, to integrate them to make sense of the text. We have also witnessed an inability to do so in some of our students. While the focus of comprehension is often on the text, we need reminders that “sentences one by one communicate the ideas that eventually add up to gist” of a text (Scott, 2004).

Reading comprehension instruction often overlooks sentence comprehension. Kate Cain (2012) tells us the foundation for discourse comprehension rests on an understanding of word and sentence meaning and, when flawed, can be a potential source of comprehension difficulties. While we understand how word meaning (semantics) contributes directly to comprehension, similarly recognizing the role of syntactical structures (parts of speech, phrases, clauses, types of sentences, and cohesive ties) is essential.

Some may be cringing again as I connect syntax (AKA grammar) to comprehension. Rest assured, I am not an advocate for teaching students syntax from a “mechanical” or “memorization” perspective. Rather, I advocate that educators consider how to integrate semantics and syntax instruction by considering respective contributions to meaning. For example, I would not teach parts of speech and their role in sentences without connecting their function to meaning. We know that nouns are “namers,” but they also answer the questions “who or what.”

So, let’s revisit the idea of diagramming sentences. This, along with other explicit sentence-based activities—such as sentence combining and anagrams—can be used to foster sentence composition and comprehension, but only if we, as teachers, are clear on the purpose: to facilitate the student’s ability to extract and construct meaning. The bottom line is that sentence instruction should always focus on how syntax is used as a vehicle for conveying meaning.

### **One more thing ...**

Lastly, I want to acknowledge that both writing and reading proficiency require much more than developing the ability to construct and comprehend sentences. At the same time, I hope that I have conveyed that sentences are the busy bees of text, have been underappreciated, and require attention—particularly as you design and deliver comprehension instruction.

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