Write better. That’s it—that’s one of my goals for my middle school students. I want them to write better. That means I want them to write with more passion, write about interesting topics, and write using the standard conventions of English usage and grammar that make the writing meaningful. It’s a simple-sounding goal, but like most language arts teachers, I work endlessly to help my students write better. I want every minute of class time to be meaningful.

For years, when final drafts crossed my desk filled with misused commas, run-on sentences, or plodding subject-verb sentences, I wondered in frustration, “How can I improve students’ punctuation and expand their sentence repertoire?” I’ve used minilessons and individual conferences to demonstrate correct sentences, but when I read students’ e-mail messages or notes passed in hallways or reports written for other classes, I see clearly that my minilessons on how to punctuate didn’t make it past our classroom doors. I understand that notes scribbled on torn bits of paper or whipped off in a quick e-mail won’t generally contain all (any?) of the conventions of standard English, but I did have hopes that the essay for the social studies class or the report for the science class might show that we have, really have, on many occasions, talked about punctuation in our language arts classroom!

The more I used minilessons and conferencing, the more convinced I became that in addition to responding to individual problems as they arose, I also needed a plan, a systematic approach to teaching conventions of punctuation and techniques of sentence combining. Surely, I believed, I could teach this within the writing context and still cover usage and punctuation topics I wanted students to master. With that goal in mind, I gradually developed a two-year grammar sequence that a number of my colleagues and I use in conjunction with our writing and reading programs during the seventh and eighth grades. Now, when students finish eighth grade (the second year in this grammar sequence), we see increased variety in students’ sentence structure and a new ease with punctuation. We measure increased knowledge of punctuation both from our pre-test and post-test results and from the students’ enthusiastic descriptions of their writing progress. At the end of last year, Devi Chari, one of the eighth-grade students, observed:

I . . . noticed that in my older papers, there were many adverb clause, compound sentence, and adjective clause errors. In addition, I added many commas in

Devi noticed far fewer punctuation errors when she compared her narratives to those she wrote a year ago.

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bizarre places, such as in the middle of a simple sentence. Not only that but I would find these errors very often. Sometimes I could find these errors almost every other sentence. Now these errors are hard to find; they’re sometimes not even existent in a whole paper. I’m extremely proud of this accomplishment, and I know that this will help me very often in the future when writing anything.

What’s exciting about Devi’s comments is that she’s right! In early seventh grade, she did put commas wherever she wanted, whenever she wanted. Now she not only knows when to use them, but she knows terms like adverb clause, compound sentence, and adjective clause. While not all students begin to use the terminology as fluently as Devi did, most students do learn the more important skill—when and how to punctuate correctly. I believe Devi’s success, and other students’ success, comes from the way we’ve combined grammar instruction with what students are reading and writing.

The Plan: Integrating Grammar Instruction

The schedule for grammar instruction (shown in Figure 1) typically introduces one new concept each month: in September, I teach compound sentences; in October, we review that and then I introduce adverb clauses. This continues month by month, moving on to appositives, adjective clauses, and finally participial phrases—all of which find their way into student writing.

This approach offers a purposeful progression through a variety of sentence constructions. Though some students may write longer, grammatically complex sentences merely because they are reading the work of talented writers, I’ve found many students benefit from explicit instruction in these grammatical constructs. Therefore, I place my students into a grammar “studio” where their clay is the multiple sentence variation that I present for their use. The grammatical experience is thus an integral part of the entire writing process.

Every time I teach a new unit or concept, I write several short paragraphs for classroom practice. After introducing compound sentences, for example, I write paragraphs about the children’s daily lives or about a piece of literature that we are reading, paragraphs embedded with punctuation errors needing correction. Students need to see many sample paragraphs—more than any grammar text would provide—so my colleagues and I write and share our own materials.

Figure 2 shows a worksheet on using commas and semicolons that we use after students read “The Tell-Tale Heart.” You can see other examples that cover the full range of the grammar program at http://www.winnnetka.k12.il.us/cw%20washburne_links_grammaruni.html.

Multiple experiences with sample paragraphs and sentences like those in Figure 2 heighten students’ familiarity with sentence structure and punctuation. They are used as 10-minute minilessons at the beginning of class several days a week until I give a test on the material. As a part of the minilessons, I present a particular set of “signal words” that help students easily find and punctuate each type of sentence.

For example, when I teach compound sentences in the first year, I write six coordinate conjunctions on the chalkboard for the students to learn:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seventh Grade</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Compound Sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Compound Sentences/Adverb Clauses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Adverb Clauses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Appositives and Adjective Clauses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Review of all covered so far</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>Review continued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Parentheticals, Series, Dates, and Addresses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April–May</td>
<td>Review of all covered</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eighth Grade</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Review Compound Sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Review Adverb Clauses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subject/Verb agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Participial Phrases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Appositives and Adjective Clauses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Adjective Clauses and Participial Phrases again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February–May</td>
<td>Review all punctuation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. A two-year plan for teaching clauses, phrases, sentence structure, and punctuation

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Berger | A Systematic Approach to Grammar Instruction

• and, but, or
• yet, so, for

I show how the conjunction and a comma together can connect two ideas, or how a semicolon can be used to connect two closely related ideas. Then I ask the students to write an imaginative story, a narrative, or literature response using and highlighting compound sentences to show that they recognize them in their own writing.

When I move from compound sentences to adverb clauses, I again depend on “signal words.”

Directions: As you read the following sentences, add any missing commas or semicolons. Then fill in the blank that follows each sentence with the abbreviation that explains why you inserted the punctuation.

AC1 = Adverb Clause First
AC2 = Adverb Clause Second
CS = Compound Sentence
CS/INT = Compound Sentence/Interrupter
SS = Simple Sentence

1. When the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” begins his story he is very calm and quiet. _____
2. He hates his employer because the old man’s eye bothers him. _____
3. He wants to kill the old man but must wait until nightfall. ______
4. He waits until the old man is asleep and slowly opens the old man’s bedroom door. ______
5. The door makes a little noise so the old man opens his eye. ______
6. The narrator shines his lantern on the man’s eye while the old man is awake in his bed. _____
7. Since the narrator hates the eye so much he attacks the old man quickly. _____
8. The narrator has the problem of disposing of the body yet he has a clever idea. ______
9. He tears up the floorboards and puts the pieces of the man’s body beneath them. _____
10. Although he is very careful someone has called the police. _____
11. The police come to investigate the sounds so the narrator invites them into the apartment. ______
12. While the narrator is answering their questions he begins to hear a heartbeat. ______
13. The police continue to calmly ask questions therefore the narrator worries about the noisy heartbeat. ______
14. Finally he confesses for he cannot stand the heartbeat any longer. ______

Here are suggested answers for this worksheet:

1. story, AC1
2. no comma AC2
3. no comma SS
4. no comma SS
5. noise, CS
6. no comma AC2
7. much, AC1
8. body, CS
9. no comma SS
10. careful, AC1
11. sounds, CS
12. questions, AC1
13. questions; therefore, CS/INT
14. confesses, CS

Figure 2. Comma and semicolon practice to accompany “The Tell-Tale Heart”
This approach differs from traditional programs that teach punctuation separately from writing. As soon as I teach a new sentence structure, students are required to incorporate it consciously in their written pieces. Class assignment sheets provide not only the idea choices for the composition, but also a grammar requirement for the finished paper. In the early part of the year, this may mean: “Highlight three compound sentences that are part of your final draft.” Later in the year, the requirement might be to include and identify several adjective clauses and participial phrases in the final draft. I’ve found that making this requirement a part of the writing assignment itself helps students to transfer their new knowledge directly into their writing.

As soon as students are proficient with a sentence structure, their knowledge becomes part of their peer editing activities. I ask our peer editors to read compositions twice: once to evaluate organization, clarity, elaboration, and word choice, and a second time to focus on “correctness” of punctuation and spelling. For example, as soon as we’ve discussed compound sentences and adverb clauses, I ask peer editors to correct punctuation of those items. Peer editors use editing worksheets that give them specific directions for each writing assignment (see Figure 3).

By December or January of the seventh grade, I am ready to introduce appositives and adjective clauses—not with technical terminology, but as a natural outgrowth of combining short, choppy sentences so that they flow better. Either with an overhead transparency or on the chalkboard, I show how sentences can be combined smoothly by using appositives and adjective clauses. To help students identify adjective clauses, I offer another set of signal words:

- who, whom, whose, which, that

I show students how two sentences like “Sarah is an excellent writer. She is in seventh grade” can become “Sarah, who is a seventh grader, is an excellent writer.” We’ll practice that combining technique often for several weeks during our minilessons. In addition, I again incorporate the newly introduced variations into paragraphs that I prepare, and soon after, I ask students to write their own paragraphs using appositives and adjective clauses. I’ve found that students’ stories written in the springtime show much greater sentence variation, and their punctuation shows enormous improvement.

The Results: Improved Writing and Reading

What are the results of this approach? In the second year of the program, when students are at ease with a wide variety of sentence structures, they begin to help each other reorganize sentences or tighten groups of choppy sentences, suggesting sentence combinations that use compound sentences, adverb and adjective clauses, and participial phrases. In his self-evaluation, one eighth-grade boy observed, “In seventh grade, it [peer editing] was mostly finding punctuation mistakes, but in eighth grade, it was more about writing smoother, more interesting sentences.”

He’s correct. As his teachers followed a basic systematic approach to teaching sentence patterns (see Figure 4 on p. 48), students incorporated those patterns and accompanying punctuation into their writing. By the end of eighth grade, that led them to writing, as this student put it, “smoother, more interesting sentences.”

But the program does not work miracles! Much that is learned during seventh grade fades
away over the quiet months of summer. We’ve learned that the eighth-grade year must begin with a patient review of all the variations that were discussed the year before. From the review, students move on to participial phrases, again using simplified terminology (“ing” or “ed” phrases added on to the main idea). Students see lots of examples of how participial phrases can be used to combine sentences. For instance, I give them two sentences like:

The girl bent over to pick up her pen.

She found a quarter on the floor.

Then we brainstorm ways to combine these sentences using a participial phrase. They might come up with

Bending over to pick up her pen, the girl found a quarter on the floor.

or

The girl, bending over to pick up her pen, found a quarter on the floor.

As students practice the pattern, they learn the terminology. As we use the terminology, they practice the pattern. The two reinforce one another and sometimes students even remember both from day to day.

With so much verbal “equipment” at their disposal, the students’ writing becomes richer and richer. Participial phrases and adverb clauses weave themselves into their narratives, enlivening their descriptive moments, helping them to “show”

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Figure 3. Peer editor’s worksheet

Your Name:

Writer’s Name:

1a. Introduction is interesting and has a spark to make it enjoyable.
   Yes No

1b. Introduction moves to thesis or main point of paper.
   Yes No

2. There is a topic sentence for proof paragraphs. Look carefully.
   Yes No

3. Transition words move the reader from one point to the next.
   Circle these transitions (words like also, in addition, furthermore, first of all, another, one other, by contrast, on the other hand). Write “Add transition” if the author has failed to connect ideas smoothly.
   Yes No

4. Points are clearly explained.
   If no, write “Not clear” by the confusing section.
   Yes No

5. Quotations are explained by the author so that you understand why the author chose to use that quotation. Write “Explain quote” if the author failed to offer an explanation of the quotation.
   Yes No

6. Quoted material was referenced either in the body of the paper or with footnotes. Write “Add source” if reference is missing.
   Yes No

7. Summary sentences are used occasionally to help readers remember what’s been previously discussed. Write “Add summary sentence” if you believe one is missing.
   Yes No

8. The conclusion not only restates the opening paragraph’s main point, but also offers interesting closure to the topic.
   Yes No

9. Commas are used correctly after adverb phrases or with compound sentences.
   Place a check mark in the margin where commas are not used or used incorrectly.
   Yes No

10. Apostrophes are used correctly with contractions and possessives.
    Yes No

11. Easily confused words aren’t confused (their/they’re/there, too/to/two, where/were)
    Yes No

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rather than merely tell. Their efforts to help readers visualize their experiences are more fruitful because they have internalized these sentence variations. They have grown dissatisfied with last year’s short, choppy sentences; now they are enjoying the life and rhythm that they can create with their own varied sentences.

Also, their appreciation of writing style in literature expands. Last year, eighth grader Kristen Lahmeyer reflected on how the language she found in Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air* and Kotlowitz’s *There Are No Children Here* inspired her to include more detail and sensory description using all the sentence variety she could muster: “I mean, reading those authors and seeing how they write just makes you want to go back and use all those techniques in your own writing.”

Throughout the creation of this program, I met with colleagues to discuss the growth of our student writers. All of us were anxious to maximize our time with students and to empower them to record with passion and correctness all that they see and feel. In our search for ideas and guidance, we gained insights from the writings of professionals like Peter Elbow, who talks inspiringly about authentic voice; Ralph Fletcher and Nancie Atwell, who clearly emphasize the benefits of keeping a writer’s notebook and scheduling writers’ workshop; Tom Romano, who invites writers to break away from the ordinary; and Constance Weaver, who intelligently articulates the need for grammar taught in the context of writing. I found Weaver’s book, *Lessons to Share*, to be the single most helpful compilation of articles about grammar instruction. In one of those articles, “Developing Correctness in Student Writing,” Lois Matz Rosen expresses ideas about writing, revising, and editing that are particularly practical and valuable. She says, “Responsibility for the correctness of any given piece of writing should fall mainly on the student, not the teacher.” I agree.

But if responsibility for correctness falls to the student, then what is the teacher’s obligation? I believe it is to provide grammar instruction that is meaningful, both to content students are reading and the writing they are attempting. Isolated skill exercises with no connection to what students are reading or writing results in just that—isolated skills with no connection to what students are reading or writing. But systematic grammar and usage instruction connected to what students are reading and writing has been valuable for my students.

I suggest that there is a place—a valuable place—for classroom lessons on sentence variation and punctuation. As I often tell my students, in order to prepare writing for publication, in order to share an oral or written message with a literate public, one needs a solid knowledge—a foundation—in sentence variety and punctuation. Once they know the rules of convention, I explain, they will know when to break them!

I have found that my students learn those rules better and use those rules more often when my instruction is guided less by the error of the mo-

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**Figure 4.** Systematic approach to introducing sentence patterns and accompanying punctuation

- Teacher teaches a sentence variation using a set of “signal words”
- Students review the skill with practice paragraphs
- Teacher evaluates students’ grasp of the skill using another paragraph
- Students write narratives and essays incorporating new grammar and punctuation skill
- Students incorporate new punctuation concepts into peer editing sessions
ment and more by a scope and sequence that addresses many grammar conventions. Therefore, I must give my students more than the opportunity to edit and revise, more than the occasional minilesson that often has temporary effects, and more than those delicious forays into the writing of skilled authors. In my experience, students become better editors of their own writing and stronger critics of others’ writing when they are exposed to a steady diet of sentence possibilities, explicit instruction in the punctuation of those sentence patterns, and orchestrated practice of those patterns. This type of systematic instruction that is tied to their own writing helps students write better.

Write better. That was the goal, wasn’t it?

References


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Search for a New Editor of English Journal
NCTE is seeking a new editor of *English Journal*. In July 2003, the term of the present editor, Virginia Monseau, will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received no later than October 31, 2001. Letters should include the applicant’s vision for the journal, and be accompanied by the applicant’s vita, one sample of published writing, and at least one letter of general support from appropriate administrators at the applicant’s institution. Do not send books, monographs, or other materials that cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee in April 2002 will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2003. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be addressed to Margaret Chambers, *English Journal* Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Questions regarding any aspect of the editorship should be directed to Margaret Chambers, Managing Editor for Journals: mchambers@ncte.org, (217) 278-3623.