

Preface

T*ools Students Need to Be Skillful Writers: Building Better Sentences* is not intended to be a comprehensive list of rules to be followed by students and teachers. It is not intended to be a textbook or a scripted program.

Tools Students Need to Be Skillful Writers is intended to be a sourcebook of sentence-level grammar activities that will give students explicit practice and confidence in writing a variety of sentence types effectively. It is a book of practical ideas to be shared by real teachers as they help students to study and practice the craft of writing. It is intended to follow standard written English and provide insights into the courtesies of consistent and accurate mechanics, spelling, and usage. And, perhaps most importantly, it is intended to honor the expertise of teachers as decision makers as they celebrate the art of teaching.

With the advent of high-stakes testing in the 1980s, I, like many teachers, was required to teach writing formulas. I attended one or two forty-five-minute after-school workshops with presenters who flew through formulas that assigned a numerical value to every sentence. Each presenter promised, “If students simply follow the formula, they will create high-scoring essays.” But the rigid formulas bothered me. Students were held to a specific number of paragraphs, a specific number of sentences per paragraph, and mandated transition words that often did not accurately express the relationship among the ideas. The strict formulas lacked creativity, student choice, purpose, and authenticity. My philosophy of education revolved around student choice and decision making, which I did not find in strict adherence to formulas.

Fortunately, I soon had an opportunity to attend a full-day workshop led by Dr. J. E. Sparks, the author of *Write for Power* (1982), which had the reputation of being another of those rigid formulas for writing essays. However, during the workshop Dr. Sparks never pushed a rigid formula like the ones that I had seen in other workshops. He discussed structures of text. He demonstrated how to move from general to specific ideas as an organization pattern, and he talked about sentence patterns. He discussed vocabulary, sentence variety, and specific details. His book contained examples of thirty-nine sentence patterns that he recommended we use while writing essays. Dr. Sparks encouraged sentence variety but did not offer a specific way to teach the patterns. I was intrigued by this idea of sentence patterns because my students’ essays were littered with fragments and run-ons. More disturbing, my students did not recognize these errors, nor did they have any idea how to correct those errors once I pointed them out.

I began researching and wondered how to go about teaching the patterns to my students. Living in a small town in the early 1980s meant that I did not have Internet access at school or home. Nor did I have immediate access to a library stocked with educational materials. Nonetheless, I did stumble upon two textbooks that helped me. The first was one about sentence patterns developed by the University of Michigan. The second was Barron's *The Art of Styling Sentences*. Both of these texts gave me valuable grammatical explanations of various patterns and alerted me to standard English rules and possible pitfalls. But neither provided me with a clear methodology.

I had begun haphazardly teaching patterns to my students. In spite of my somewhat disjointed efforts, the students began constructing effective sentences. I noticed fewer fragments and run-on sentences in their work. Students began to recognize fragments and run-ons and attempted to correct them. My students had an air of confidence as they tackled assignments. I knew the patterns were a valuable tool, so I continued my search for methods of instruction. I wanted all of my students to succeed.

The next piece of the puzzle came to me during a one-hour presentation by Herb Hrebic, one of the developers of the *Stack the Deck* writing program. During that hour, I came to understand that if I wanted students to become authors, I needed to teach with a positive attitude and build on students' skills rather than nitpick at their faults. I loved Hrebic's upbeat, kindhearted approach to teaching composition.

I continued to scramble for ideas to synthesize the information as it came to me. During Hrebic's presentation, he demonstrated sentence combining, a technique I had never used. Immediately, I saw how this technique could support sentence patterns, which led me to William Strong.

Strong's work on sentence combinations gave me a piece that was missing in the sentence pattern work that I had been doing with my students. I began developing combinations that matched the patterns to provide students additional support as they learned to write the sentences independently. I cannot say that my students enjoyed working on sentence combinations, but I can say that working on the combinations helped my students to develop a better understanding of the patterns and how to manipulate sentence elements. It also became my strongest tool in teaching the mechanics of writing. Sentence combining helped students who still struggled to write an original sentence after studying the models. After working on combinations, they could return to the models and write original sentences.

Over the years I continued to collect and refine ideas that would help the students learn sentence patterns. This book is a collection of those ideas and materials. I have been using most of these activities for twenty to thirty years, so in some cases I am not sure of the origin of the activity. I have made every effort to find the original sources. Over the years I have made numerous changes to the activities, and I find that I still change the activities as classrooms and student needs change.

I often have thought that only a fool would attempt to write a book about writing or how to teach writing; so yes, I am a fool. Writing such a book is an invitation to argument, to fault-finding, to accusations. Syntax sticklers will find

errors. Good writing, style, voice—I challenge my readers to define any of these. If they do manage to define voice or style, I challenge them to find ten people who will agree on one definition of these elements. I do feel that writing rests on the back of grammar, but even those rules are nebulous. For example, I consulted three respected resources concerning the rules for punctuating sentences with conjunctive adverbs, and I came away with three distinct sets of rules.

With each pattern, my students learned punctuation rules, or as I preferred to teach it—punctuation courtesies. Lacking a classroom textbook, I researched the mechanics for each pattern and made decisions about correct usage. I researched some of the giants of writing—Strunk and White, Graves, Zinsser, and others. I scanned textbooks and manuals of style. I often found disagreements concerning usage of commas, semicolons, and colons.

The requirements of our high school programs also influenced my decisions. I wanted my students' transition to high school to be as effortless as possible. Hence, when my resources disagreed on rules, I turned to the high school texts for guidance on standard written English and chose to teach the rule that the students most likely would be expected to use in high school.

I know that people will disagree with some of my decisions about grammar and punctuation. No doubt, my suggestions may even offend some. But language is not static, and rules do fall by the wayside or change dramatically with time. Sentence patterns, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling—all of these elements of language do change. If you doubt me, read a bit of Thomas Jefferson's second inaugural address, and notice the enormous differences in spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, and vocabulary:

I repair, then, fellow-citizens, to the post you have assigned me. With experience enough in subordinate offices to have seen the difficulties of this the greatest of all. I have learnt to expect that it will rarely fall to the lot of imperfect man to retire from this station with the reputation and the favor which bring him into it. . . . The approbation implied by your suffrage is a great consolation to me for the past, and my future solicitude will be to retain the good opinion of those who have bestowed it in advance, to conciliate that of others by doing them all the good in my power, and to be instrumental to the happiness and freedom of all.

I am not a grammar goddess; I am not a maven of mechanics. But I am a teacher who has had success teaching sentence patterns to students. My goal is to share those techniques and ideas. This is a book of suggestions, not a rigid script. Good teachers will change my suggestions to fit their teaching style and the needs of their students. My goal is to share ideas with other teachers; my hope is that they will share their success stories and ideas with me.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 provides reasons and research to support the teaching of sentence patterns. It shows the link between grammar and writing and offers encouragement

to break from traditional grammar lessons. Chapter 2 provides a range of activities that can be used to teach the parts of speech. The premise of the book is that all patterns grow from two basic patterns: noun-verb and noun-verb-noun. Hence, it is crucial that students develop a strong understanding of the concept of a noun and the concept of a verb before they begin studying the patterns.

Chapter 3 is the meat of the book and might seem overwhelming at first. I suggest that readers at first focus on the patterns for one grade level, which will make the task of teaching patterns manageable. This chapter provides directions and suggestions for teaching the patterns, including the teacher's role and the students' roles. Background Information sections concerning punctuation and grammar are provided for each pattern. Readers also will find Points for Student Analysis sections and helpful hints for teachers. The idea of teaching patterns is to show students models of the pattern and then provide them time to analyze the pattern prior to a teacher-led discussion. A reliable English textbook will be a valuable resource at this point.

Chapters 4 through 6 provide sentence combination exercises, games, and activities tied directly to each pattern. The opportunity to deconstruct and reconstruct sentences will be most helpful to teachers moving students through the tiers of response to intervention (RTI). If students find themselves struggling with a pattern, the activities in Chapters 4 through 6 can be used to provide additional help so that students understand the structures.

Chapters 7 and 8 explain the relationship between sentence patterns and writing paragraphs, essays, and narratives. One new pattern is analyzed and practiced on the first day of every week. The remaining days are writing workshop days that require students to use the patterns as they develop longer pieces of text. This book does not intend to teach all the ins and outs of a writing workshop, but it does address how to use the patterns in a workshop setting.