

THE SENTENCE—COMPOSING APPROACH

“Nothing is more satisfying than to write a good sentence.”

—Barbara Tuchman, historian

Developed over many years by coauthor Don Killgallon, the sentence-composing approach is a unique, eminently teachable rhetoric of the sentence. Its distinguishing feature is the linking of the three strands of the English curriculum—grammar, composition, and literature—through exclusive use of model sentences by authors for students to manipulate and imitate.

*“One way to learn how to make anything is to have a model,
either for duplication or for triggering one’s own ideas.”*

—Miles Myers, former director,
National Council of Teachers of English,
Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Composition

Sentence composing provides acrobatic training in sentence dexterity. All sentence composing techniques in the worktext—matching, exchanging, unscrambling, combining, imitating, expanding, multiplying—use literature as a writing school with a faculty of professional writers who virtually teach students to build better sentences.

THE ADDITION FACTOR

Pioneering linguist Francis Christensen proclaimed a profound observation about good writing: it is the “add-ons” that differentiate the writing of professionals from the writing of students. In his landmark work *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*, he said, “Composition is essentially a process of addition.” He means that good writers say more through adding sentence parts to sentences; in other words, good writing often results from elaboration.

Once students acquire the same structures that authors use, those structures—called in the worktext *sentence-composing tools* because they build strong sentences—generate elaboration. Imitating the tools used by authors through the sentence-composing techniques provides **the how**, and enhances **the what**.

With the sentence-composing approach, students succeed, including students who struggle with English language arts. With only a single sentence as the focus, and frequent imitation through varied activities, students succeed, sometimes astonishingly, in building sentences like those of authors.

Students clearly see that authors in their sentences write well largely because they say more, and say it better. Christensen singles out “the addition factor” as the key to good writing, and he’s right.

*“The writing of most of our students is thin—even threadbare.
But if he [or she] adds frequently or much or both,
then the texture may be said to be dense or rich.”*

—Francis Christensen, “A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence”

IMITATION: THE FOUNDATION OF SENTENCE COMPOSING

Imitation is used throughout the worktext as a learning method; students focus on how authors build their sentences. Then, the students experiment with building their own sentences in the same way.

For years teachers have tried to use imitation to teach writing, too often without success: for example, reading and discussing an essay before students write their own. Yet, the result is often that superficial imitation and deep frustration abound.

The problem is often that the model is overwhelming. As a result, not much rubs off on students. Like trying to eat a whole turkey instead of just a slice, it’s just too much to swallow.

It is at the sentence level that imitating is most productive because the student imitations do greatly resemble the proffered professional models. No choking here: one sentence can be easily swallowed—and digested.

Below are activities typical of those found in all of the sentence-composing worktexts.

UNSCRAMBLING

Directions: Unscramble the sentence parts to imitate the model sentence. Start with the capitalized sentence part. Write the imitation sentence.

- 1. Model Sentence:** The beautiful animal stood still, its head toward the man sitting on an upturned bucket outside the cage.

—J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

- a. A refugee yelled there
- b. waiting on the New York dock
- c. near the ship
- d. his arms waving toward his brother

2. **Model Sentence:** His father found him lying drunk in their yard, his shirt soaked with blood.

—Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

- a. Her father
- b. her voice filled with joy
- c. saw his daughter
- d. playing happily in the yard

COMBINING

Directions: Combine the **bold** parts into just one sentence that imitates the model. Write the imitation sentence.

1. **Model Sentence:** Eugie came clomping down the stairs and into the kitchen, his head drooping with sleepiness.

—Gina Berriault, “The Stone Boy”

- a. Pam started stirring around the stew.
- b. And she stirred within the sauce.
- c. When she did this, her recipe was smelling of cloves.

2. **Model Sentence:** Pushing himself up, his pain throbbing in his legs, he looked around.

—Robb White, *Deathwatch*

- a. She was covering herself over,
- b. Her chills were pulsing.
- c. They were pulsing through her body.
- d. Rosa sat down.

IMITATING

Directions: The model sentence and imitation sentence are built alike. Write an imitation sentence about something you saw on TV, a web site, a movie, or something in your life. Do one sentence part at a time.

1. Model Sentence Parts	Imitation Sentence Parts
a. The undertaker inched through the field	a. The snake crawled through the crack
b. between the road and the house,	b. near the cellar and the shed,
c. his tires sinking into puddles of mud. —Rebecca Skloot, <i>The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks</i>	c. its movement speeded by barks from our dog.

2. Model Sentence Parts	Imitation Sentence Parts
a. Scores of workers	a. Lots of buildings
b. had been hurt or killed	b. had been damaged or destroyed
c. in building the world's fair,	c. in experiencing the strong storm
d. their families consigned to poverty. —Eric Larson, <i>The Devil in the White City</i>	d. their architecture reduced to rubble.

Sentence imitating demonstrates that authors' sentences have "architecture," and that the structure of the sentence is its blueprint. With sufficient practice, students can, with surprising ease, build their own sentences with similar architecture from the same blueprint.

CREATION: THE GOAL OF SENTENCE COMPOSING

Imitation and invention are not mutually exclusive. They often complement each other. In any endeavor, in building a skyscraper, or in building a sentence—all imitative processes are akin to creative processes: a model is both an end-point and a starting-point. Something is borrowed from the model, and something is begun from it. Something is retained, and something is created. In imitating sentences by authors, students borrow something (structure) and contribute something (content), through a merging of imitation and creation. Imitation is, therefore, a conduit to originality, a link to creation.

Imitation is sincerest flattery, yes—but also, for sure, profound pedagogy. As a result of completing this worktext, students intuit the link between imitation, which is the foundation of sentence composing, and creation, its goal.

*“Imitation allows students to be creative, to find their own voices
as they imitate certain aspects of other voices.”*

—Paul Butler, “Imitation as Freedom”

As students work through sentence-composing activities, they learn the sentence-building tools of authors, discovering their own significant voices as writers, but lastingly hearing the whispering of other voices—Harper Lee’s, John Steinbeck’s, J. K. Rowling’s, Yann Martel’s, Suzanne Collins’ and all the rest within the sentence-composing worktext; voices that help students discover their own.

Observation of the sentence-composing practices of authors shows that authors use a variety of structures (tools) frequently, students infrequently, in building their sentences. Just as infinitely varied music can be based upon just a few notes and chords, those sentence-building tools allow for the creation of an endless variety of sentence structures. All of the sentence-composing worktexts provide activities to bridge the gap between the sentence-composing practices of authors and students.