Seven Sentence Building
Activities to Develop Advanced Writers

Grades 2-10

By Jerry Morris

Collins Education Associates LLC
PERMISSIONS/SINGLE USER LICENSE

The purchase of this electronic file entitles a single user to reproduce and display the pages for their individual use. Reproduction in any part for an entire school, district or system, or for commercial use, is not permitted. Any other use without prior permission in writing from the author is prohibited.

DISCLAIMER:

THIS SOFTWARE IS PROVIDED BY THE COPYRIGHT HOLDER "AS IS" AND ANY EXPRESS OR IMPLIED WARRANTIES, INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, THE IMPLIED WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY AND FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE ARE DISCLAIMED. IN NO EVENT SHALL THE COPYRIGHT OWNER BE LIABLE FOR ANY DIRECT, INDIRECT, INCIDENTAL, SPECIAL, EXEMPLARY, OR CONSEQUENTIAL DAMAGES (INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, PROCUREMENT OF SUBSTITUTE GOODS OR SERVICES; LOSS OF USE, DATA, OR PROFITS; OR BUSINESS INTERRUPTION) HOWEVER CAUSED AND ON ANY THEORY OF LIABILITY, WHETHER IN CONTRACT, STRICT LIABILITY, OR TORT (INCLUDING NEGLIGENCE OR OTHERWISE) ARISING IN ANY WAY OUT OF THE USE OF THIS SOFTWARE, EVEN IF ADVISED OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.
Seven Sentence Building Activities to Develop Advanced Writers

Grades 2–10

by
Jerry Morris
Collins Education Associates LLC
# Contents

*Acknowledgements*  
*Foreword*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction – My Story</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to Use This Book</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions and Answers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible Schedule for What to Cover at Different Grade Levels</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripted Lesson</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiz Template</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All Activities Have Sample Sentences and Quiz*

| Activity One: Simple Sentence – Specific Language – Simile | 21 |
| Activity One: Basic Template                          | 22 |
| Activity Two: Simple Sentence – Parallel Construction – Multiple Subjects | 29 |
| Activity Two: Basic Template                          | 30 |
| Activity Three: Simple Sentence – Parallel Construction – Multiple Predicates | 39 |
| Activity Three: Basic Template                        | 40 |
| Activity Four: Compound Sentence – Personification    | 49 |
| Activity Four: Basic Template                         | 50 |
| Activity Five: Complex Sentence – The Metaphor        | 59 |
| Activity Five: Basic Template                         | 60 |
| Activity Six: Compound-Complex Sentence – Hyperbole    | 69 |
| Activity Six: Basic Template                          | 70 |
| Activity Seven: Appositive, Relative Clause, Absolute Phrase | 79 |
| Template – Appositive                                 | 80 |
| Template – Relative Clause                           | 84 |
| Template – Absolute Phrase                           | 86 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Bases</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics for Content Based Sentences</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

I have conducted hundreds of writing workshops across the country for the Collins Writing Program. At the beginning of each workshop, I hold above my head a tattered little book, bound with clear tape, and embraced with a rubber band. "This is the best book on writing you will ever read. It's *The Elements of Style* written by William Strunk, Jr., a professor at Cornell, and his famous student, E.B. White. As you can see, I've had it for awhile."

Often times when I'm flying back to Boston, I tug my old friend from my bag and read some of my favorite passages. This book inspired my teaching during my decades in the classroom, and it is the inspiration for this book.

If you are curious enough and patient enough to read my book, you will see how I took the advice of my heroes of the written word and brought that advice to young students.

Purchase a copy of *The Elements of Style*. Far better writers than I have sung its praises — from Hemingway to Steven King. This is the bible of the written word for a host of other scribblers as well as me. Over ten million copies have been sold, so copies await you on shelves in your neighborhood. You can purchase a used copy online for less than the price of a cup of café latte.

About the Cover

The young writer needs to understand the *structures* available to get thoughts on paper and to learn and use the *conventions* of the English language within these structures. To breathe life into writing, the novice begins to unravel the mysteries of *style* by tinkering with words, phrases, clauses, and figures of speech. Eventually, the writer's words will leave a distinct sound on the page. This sound is the writer's *voice*.

~ Jerry Morris
In *Seven Sentence Building Activities to Develop Advanced Writers*, Jerry Morris presents techniques he developed over three decades to solve one of the most common and irksome problems facing teachers: how to help basic writers become more proficient. Helping students apply basic capitalization and punctuation rules is easy compared to getting them to use specific language, figures of speech, and complex sentences — some of the techniques that make basic writing more advanced. Throughout his career, Jerry has taken on this worthy challenge, and this book distills his experiences into seven sentence building activities that can be used from the second grade on up.

We know Jerry’s techniques are successful because of high scores schools in his district achieved on the notoriously difficult Massachusetts writing tests (MCAS.) How did he do it? He used guidelines from his favorite book on writing — William Strunk and E. B. White’s *The Elements of Style*, originally written for students at Cornell University — and adapted them for younger students.

Jerry, like Strunk and White, focuses on the sentence. He provides students with opportunities to create original compound and complex sentences that include similes, metaphors, parallel construction, appositives, multiple subjects and predicates, and personification. Students are successful because they have plenty of opportunities to practice and build skills step-by-step. This is not a fill-in-the-blank workbook, but a structure to help teachers and students discover the joys of crafting advanced sentences.

To make his approach more powerful, he has added two of my favorite techniques: oral reading and focus correcting. Oral reading, having students read their papers to themselves out loud, is a powerful but under-used technique that helps students develop a “writer’s ear.” Focus correcting will make the job of assessing student writing easier because, as the name suggests, it focuses on a few aspects of the writing. Jerry’s approach, based on seven activities, will instruct your students in the “elements of style” while not producing an overwhelming burden of papers to grade.

Jerry provides a six- to eight-week process for the beginning of the year to introduce students to the seven sentence building techniques. These techniques can then be used throughout the year to reinforce the skills taught during the beginning of the year. For teachers using the Collins Writing Program, it is the perfect way to start teaching the qualities of style, the most difficult writing quality to teach.

Try this approach. The students will have fun while learning how to write graceful, rich sentences.

John J. Collins, Ed.D.
CEO, Collins Education Associates LLC
Introduction

What is the best way to help writers improve their skills? This book will answer the question by presenting a six- to eight-week program based on William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White’s *The Elements of Style*. It is best used in conjunction with the Collins Writing Program at the beginning of the school year.

My Story

Throughout my 34 years in the classroom, I was determined to teach my students to write well. Summaries, reports, descriptive pieces, and essays kept me correcting early and late in the day. On a typical two-page report, spelling errors, sentences that made no sense, sentences that were run together, sentences that would make grammar specialists wince in pain, and sentences with the simplest and most basic errors would make me feel like Sisyphus, a sinner from Greek mythology who was forced to push a rock up a hill only to have it roll back on him again and again. The most common errors were explained to the class. Sit-downs with students would allow me to shove many rocks up the slope. The students and I made progress, but our onward march upward was slow and exhausting.

During those early years of teaching, I was a basketball coach. Half of a typical practice was spent on individual fundamentals, and the other half was used to incorporate the fundamentals in a game situation or scrimmaging. It dawned on me that I was teaching writing by scrimmaging. I was skipping the first half of practice. Could a student remember and learn ten or more writing concepts pointed out in an individual sit-down? Would it make sense to teach basketball by having players only partake in full court games and blow the whistle to stop action to correct mistakes? I had to find a way to teach the fundamentals of writing the same way I taught the fundamentals of basketball by breaking the game of writing down into teachable segments. After learning the fundamentals in a step-by-step fashion, students would have a better chance of playing the full court game of writing longer pieces.

I searched for a sequential program that would correct foundational issues. If these fundamentals were taught before longer pieces were assigned, it would be slow in the beginning but worth it in the long run. Like a man looking for a first-rate suit, who couldn’t describe what the suit would look like but who would know it when he saw it, I went to many shops and looked at many ensembles that made me grimace. In the end, I found the suit, but it didn’t fit. I pulled Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* off the rack and read and reread it, but it needed to be tailored to fit the needs of my students. It was time to stop hunting. This book deals with the problems I faced. Much of it contains brief but clear explanations of the right and wrong way to construct a sentence. The authors zero in on the most important rules for good writing and offer the best advice on style you will find anywhere, but it didn’t fit because it was written for college students. My goal was to take what Strunk and White had to say and transform it into a language and form my students could understand and practice.
Seven Sentence Building Activities

The Elements of Style brought many issues home for me. Here are two: One, the authors didn’t talk about how to write a report, an essay, or a research paper. They spent their time on the right and wrong of sentence writing by looking at different types of sentences, not in longer pieces but one at a time. Two, the book was originally written by William Strunk, Jr. for his students at Cornell, an Ivy League School. If he wrote a book about many common mistakes seen in sentences, he must have been seeing them from his elite students. To this day, the book is given to college freshmen across the land. College professors must be seeing many of the same mistakes Will Strunk saw, similar to those I was seeing among my school kids.

The run-on sentence drove me to distraction. I reasoned that teaching the difference between a complete sentence and a run-on before having students write longer pieces would be a good thing. It might keep my hair brown. Teaching the difference between a fragment and a complete sentence might keep me from having nervous twitches. Teaching some structures such as simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences would allow students to get their thoughts on paper better and allow them to vary the types of sentences they wrote. Teaching them the figures of speech one at a time would give their writing more punch. I might drink less coffee. Teaching them some basic rules of writing taught to me by my heroes, Strunk and White, and translating those rules to young writers would set them on the right course. But most importantly, getting them excited about their writing, proud of the words they put on the page, and confident that they could be good and maybe great at writing could push the rock over the top of the hill. Sisyphus, your sins are forgiven!

Starting in my fifth year of teaching and continuing until my thirty-fourth year, I worked to develop a program that would address those issues. It was the best work I ever did. The results were dramatic. Each year, it took time to clear the precarious writing path of the boulders of run-ons, the potholes of fragments, the thorns of broken rules, and the low branches of poorly constructed sentences that whipped me in the face. Progress was slow in the beginning. But when the students and I made our way down the path for a succeeding journey, we had a much better jaunt.

In answer to my initial question — what is the best way to help writers improve their skills — teach a few concepts at a time by building one sentence at a time (again and again). The skills build from one week to the next. You will teach more effectively and have happier, more skilled, and more confident writers. By the time your students are finished with the first eight weeks of school, they will have learned the structure of many types of sentences, figures of speech, rules of good writing from Strunk and White, and the habits of mind a good writer possesses. Like me you will be saying, “This is the best thing I’ve ever done with my students!”
How to Use This Book

Begin by reading A Scripted Lesson on page 13. This section describes how the process looks and sounds in the classroom. Every teacher's script will be unique, but this gives you a starting point.

At the start of each week, you need to make enough double-sided copies of the template for the activity with the blank quiz (page 17) on the back. Although you do not need to do a great deal of preparation for this program, every student needs a double-sided copy for each sentence that they will write.

Next, review the title page for the activity to see what is covered. Show students the examples from some great authors as well as the sample sentences from the activity. Before teaching the activity to the class, read the two pages of directions and advice from Strunk and White. This will tell you what is covered and provide the focus of the activity.

Following the directions and suggestions from the scripted lesson, lead students through building the sentence. Have them read what they wrote out loud in a one-foot voice several times during the process. Follow this reading with a teacher-led edit where students check to make sure they have done what the FCAs required. End with the quiz on the back.

To demonstrate editing, you could use the student samples provided in this book. Using a document projector or transparency, project the samples and have students suggest corrections or improvements. You could also take samples from the class, having students correct them before they edit their own papers. Avoid doing individual sit-downs with students. Instead, make them the editors.

Write a sentence every day in class for a week. Assign one to three sentences for homework each night. By the end of the week, students will have written at least ten sentences for the activity and should have concepts mastered. If they have not, stay on the same activity for several more days until the concepts are learned.

At the end of most weeks, it is time to move on to the next activity. With the exception of Activity One, the activities have several templates ranging from basic to intermediate to advanced. In the lower grades, teachers will use the basic and/or intermediate templates, and the process could take more than six to eight weeks to complete if more practice is necessary. In the upper grades, teachers will use the intermediate and/or advanced templates.
Questions and Answers

How does sentence building fit with the Collins Writing Program?

It fits in many ways, but let me mention just a few. First, in the Collins Writing Program, teachers use a selective approach to teaching and correcting writing called Focus Correcting. The research and our classroom experience tell us to teach a few elements in writing at a time and correct only those. These areas are called Focus Correction Areas or FCAs. On the templates in this book, you will see FCAs. For those of you who have used Collins Writing in the past, using FCAs in sentences rather than longer pieces is something new. But once these sentence building activities are complete, the FCAs can be transferred to longer, more sustained pieces of writing. For example, a paragraph could have these FCAs: Topic sentence — three to five details with support — one figure of speech. The figure of speech would be an FCA transferred from sentence building.

In both approaches, students are required to read what they have written in a whisper, what we call a one-foot voice, to check to see if the writing makes sense and sounds good. You will see this aspect of Collins Writing emphasized to the point where you will be saying, “Jerry, I think I get it. You want the kids to read what they write as a first form of editing. I got it after you told me ten times, and now we are on ten to the tenth power. I think I’ve got it.”

Finally, part of the philosophy of the Collins Writing Program is to have students write many short pieces of writing, as opposed to writing a few long pieces of writing. We are carrying this belief to a new level of brevity with sentence building.

How can I afford to spend a month or two on sentence building?

If you are correcting the same issues I was, you can’t afford not to. With stronger writers, you can do it in less time. But if you have less mature learners, you might want to spend more time on it. You might have to spend more time on it. Think of math. If you have a group of kids who do not know their math facts and the basic concepts of number, time, and space, doesn’t this slow the teaching and learning of math to a crawl? You are probably spending some time on math basics the same way I was teaching individual fundamentals in the first half of basketball practice. The more fundamentally sound the player, the better chance he or she could move to the next level of competition. The same is true for the student both in math and in writing. Our goal is to have fundamentally sound players and students who can move to the next level. Remember, this is about building advanced writers. That’s hard to do. It will take time.

What about results? What kind of return can I expect to receive on this investment of time and teaching?

With sufficient practice, the basic writer will develop into a more competent advanced writer. The strong writer will reach new heights. From personal experience, I know that students love these sentence building activities. I also know they work. For example, the Daniel Webster School, a Title One school in Marshfield, Massachusetts, uses the program. Principal Ted Mitchell passed on their results to me. On a recent long write on their state test, of the more than 1,000 schools
involved, Daniel Webster students achieved the highest average score in the state. They
invest time early in the year at several grade levels on sentence building, and it pays off on their
six- to eight-paragraph long write in the spring of grade four.

Are the templates worksheets?
The templates are not worksheets. They guide you in your teaching and guide students in
practicing the concepts you want them to know. Worksheets often require one correct answer
while templates allow many ways to write ideas in sentences. For example, if you are teaching
the need for specific, concrete language, often in the form of nouns and verbs rather than
adjectives and adverbs, every student in the class may have a different, specific, concrete noun
and a different verb. The point is that the student knows the concept and practices it many
times. The practice allows the skill to surface and transfer to other pieces of writing later on.
Practice is good. Ask a musician, an athlete, or a writer.

Could I change the templates?
I encourage you to modify the templates. Also, you will see blank templates that I used in my
classroom. Teachers love the templates, so that’s why so many appear in the book. In fact Bill
Atwood, my good buddy and colleague at Collins Education Associates and one of the most
creative teachers I’ve ever known, is always bugging me with, “Jerry, I want more templates.” As
for modifying them, I would suggest crossing out or moving parts of the templates. The goal is to
discard these training wheels to free the young writer to find a balance between style and
structure.

Does this differ from the process approach to writing?
It is different, but there are similarities. Primarily, it precedes the process approach and allows
teachers to overcome many issues that inhibit progress during the writing process. As in the
process approach, not every sentence needs to be graded. The process approach also works to
make a formal paper less daunting; if students develop strong skills by building sentences, the
longer pieces will be less formidable. Prewriting activities are important in the process approach;
sentence building is also a prewriting activity and is best done before you begin your first longer
piece. Also, drafts and conferencing are important aspects in the process approach. If you do
the sentence building activities, the drafts will be better written, and the conferences will either
be shorter or will focus on more sophisticated aspects of the draft. The sentence building
activities will make your conferences more powerful.

Could the students give too many details, descriptions, adjectives, and figures of
speech?
Yes, typically students don’t tell enough in their early writing. As we move ahead and students
learn more ways to add to their sentences, they add too much. It is a natural course of action
that students will eventually go over the top with their writing and start to sound like Aunt Millie
who gushes over her niece and nephew to the point where the family is saying, “Enough already!”
Seven Sentence Building Activities

Strunk and White have great advice on this problem of overstating, and it will come later in the book. But remember, pruning follows growth. Without growth, there is nothing to prune. Much of what we are doing is growing. Later, we can work on placing big ideas on the head of a pin. This is Strunk and White’s forte.

Where does grammar fit in the sentence building?

Research indicates (most recently in the meta-analysis *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* by Steve Graham and Dolores Perin) that teaching grammar in isolation has limited positive impact on growing better writers. However, when grammar is taught with writing, the effect is more positive. In sentence building, you will use correct terms such as noun, verb, adjective, pronoun, subject, predicate, etc. Just as an auto technician needs to call a ball joint by its correct name, a writer needs to name parts of the sentence correctly. We can’t escape the fact that if we are going to create advanced writers, we need to use the proper terminology.

On the back of each template, you can give a quiz on the concepts that were taught and include grammar. A sample quiz is offered for each activity. This integrates grammar with the writing and helps lay the groundwork for a number of issues including proper subject-predicate agreement, one of the key issues in writing a sentence as noted by Rei Noguchi in *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*. Another key issue that requires knowledge of grammar is learning the proper use of pronouns. Students need to know subject, predicate, direct object, action verb, linking verb, and object of the preposition to know how to use pronouns. A great deal of grammar can be taught in the sentence building program as a byproduct of your main issue — writing.

How do I deal with spelling?

As you are brainstorming, you can write student responses on the board. So if you are asking for specific nouns, you can write them on the board. (I do this more in the lower grades and with more challenging groups than in the upper grades.) You could have another adult in the room do this for you. This provides a visual for the oral ideas offered by the class. It also gives them a correct visual for spelling the words on their templates. However, when the students are writing and they ask me to spell a word on the board, I tell them, “Do the best you can. I may have time to help you with spelling when we finish.”

When I finish the lesson, I say to the students, “Do you have any words you need spelled? Give them to me, and I’ll spell them on the board.” This does a few things. One, it places the emphasis on the writing — not spelling. Two, it gives them a correct snapshot of the word for their visual memory. My sense is that many kids have snapshots of words in their visual memories. However, they have the incorrect snapshots. By writing the word, we give them an accurate image. Three, it makes correction easier and less painful for the teacher. I let them know that I do not know how to spell every word, but I will give them the best spelling I can think of. If there is time, I look up any words I need to check while they are rewriting their sentences.
Will I need to take this more slowly in grades two and three?

Yes, you should assess how the class is taking to it and modify templates, take out parts that may be best taught later, and build with the sense of taking them a step or two above where they are. If you take many small steps, you will be amazed at how far they can progress. Give it some time and make some modifications. You will hold this process near and dear to your heart because the students will love it, and you will love their progress.

What should be done differently in grades two and three than grades four and above?

First, you will be surprised at how much you can cover if you work on a few things at a time and spend sufficient time repeating skills. Next, as in teaching any material, you will need to determine how much you can cover and the pace at which you will progress. I have taught the same material in the same school at the same grade level for a number of years. However, some years I cover more at a faster pace, and other years I cover less material at a slower pace. Watch the students. They will be telling you by their work, the look on their faces, and the answers they give in class as to how you should proceed.

Below is a possible schedule for what could be covered in grades two and three.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades Two and Three</th>
<th>Suggestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity One</strong></td>
<td>⇒ Practice for one to two weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⇒ Cross out one adjective and the simile in the earliest lesson.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity Two</strong></td>
<td>⇒ Practice for one to two weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First without adjectives and with two subjects</td>
<td>⇒ Start with the basic template on page 30.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⇒ Cross out parts if necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity Three</strong></td>
<td>⇒ Practice for one to two weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First without phrases and with two verbs</td>
<td>⇒ Start with the basic template on page 40.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⇒ Cross out parts if necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity Four</strong></td>
<td>⇒ Practice for one to two weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First without simile</td>
<td>⇒ Start with the basic template on page 50.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⇒ Cross out parts if necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity Five</strong></td>
<td>⇒ Practice for one to two weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach metaphor separately in a simple sentence then, in grade three, add to the complex sentence.</td>
<td>⇒ Start with the basic template on page 60.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>⇒ Take the sentences built in Activity One and change the simile to a metaphor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skip <strong>Activity Six</strong> unless you have an advanced group.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity Seven</strong></td>
<td>⇒ Practice for one week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appositive only. Skip relative clause and absolute phrase.</td>
<td>⇒ Take the sentences built in Activity One and add an appositive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Seven Sentence Building Activities

Below is a possible schedule for what could be covered in grades four and above.

**Grades Four and Above → Practice for seven weeks**

- Teach all of the material, break it into smaller chunks when needed, and repeat many times.
- Consider the templates at the beginning of Activities 2–6. You may want to use the intermediate template, but not the basic. You may want to go directly to the advanced template or use the blank template. You may want to use all of them.
- The lower the grade the slower the progression, but all or most can be taught by the skillful teacher to a receptive group at these levels. Pace yourself and repeat activities.
- Practice for seven weeks.

**Suggestions for Accommodating Grade Levels**

* Six of the seven activities have multiple templates (Activities 2–7). The templates move from basic, to intermediate, to advanced level. Lower-grade teachers should begin with the basic template and move to the intermediate template after judging how far their students can progress. One sentence can build upon the next as students progress from template to template in each activity. Upper grade teachers could skip the basic template, start with the intermediate template, and move to the most advanced template.

* Alter templates by crossing out parts, moving parts, or adding parts.

* Start with the blank template. This will allow the students more freedom and you the flexibility to work on issues as you see fit.

* See pages 9 and 10 for an example of how the sentences progress from grade to grade.

**Should I have students write other pieces while we are working on sentence building?**

Yes, I would strongly suggest one-paragraph summaries of literature during the six- to eight-week period. I would also suggest summaries of content in other disciplines. For example, a summary of photosynthesis or the life stage of a butterfly will help students learn content and practice skills. In these longer pieces, you will see the transfer of skills learned during sentence building, and you will see a progression of these skills from week to week.

Later, descriptions of people, a sunset, an object, etc., will allow transfer of skills, particularly figures of speech. Consider descriptions after several weeks or toward the end of sentence building.

**There are some powerful comments from teachers on the back cover. Did they have training? Did they see demonstration lessons? Or did they just read the book?**

They had training in workshops and watched me build one or more sentences with students in their class(es). Hearing the explanations, getting questions answered, and seeing a class taught are helpful.
Questions and Answers

Do you have any further suggestions for enhancing my knowledge of teaching writing?

I could make a list of books and workshops a mile long, but let me give you a few thoughts. First, for fun as well as for your edification, I’d read Steven King’s *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. You’ll be riveted to the page and learn from the writer’s side of the desk. Ruth Culham’s *6 + 1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide* will provide you with a depth of knowledge as well as seeds for later FCAs, as will Lucy Calkins’ *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Few experts know writing like Lucy Calkins. I would also study and present great writing models from E. B. White, Roald Dahl, Gary Paulson, Natalie Babbit, etc. There’s nothing like seeing the real thing. With many groups, I took short pieces from a book edited by Rebecca M. Dale entitled *Writings from the New Yorker 1927 – 1976*. Just as a young quarterback needs to see how Tom Brady throws a pass, a young writer needs to see how the greats write a sentence. Finally, the resources from Collins Education Associates will make your writing program more effective and your teaching life easier.

### Progression of Sentences

How sentences might differ in the lower grades from the upper grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Grade Level &amp; Title</th>
<th>Sample Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Two &amp; Three ~ Specific Words and Simile</td>
<td>The flag blue Mustang shot like an arrow across the busy highway.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper Grades ~ Specific Words and Simile</td>
<td>The brightly colored plumage of a young male cardinal glistened like the apparel of a supermodel on a fashion runway in Manhattan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Two &amp; Three ~ Two Subjects</td>
<td>Dirty clothes and scattered toys cluttered my room like a train wreck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper Grades ~ Parallel Construction — Multiple Subjects</td>
<td>The relentless winds, the pounding surf, and the horizontal rains pummeled the New England fishermen like gravel dumped on pavement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Two &amp; Three ~ Two Predicates</td>
<td>The exhausted second grader stumbled to the water bubbler and gulped like a man at an oasis in the desert.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper Grades ~ Parallel Construction — Multiple Predicates</td>
<td>The eager applicant yanked open the mail box, grabbed the letter with the Milton Academy return address, tore the letter open, and read with eyes that exploded in joy like fireworks on the Fourth of July.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Progression of Sentences

How sentences might differ in the lower grades from the upper grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Grade Level ~ Title</th>
<th>Sample Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two &amp; Three ~ Compound Sentence&lt;br&gt;Upper Grades ~ Compound Sentence</td>
<td>My brainy brother mixed four liquids from the fridge, and the contents foamed like a science experiment. The beautiful but lethal killer whale glided into the sleepy cove like a spy on a mission, and the sleek 40-foot sailboat with laughing guests rested at anchor unprepared for the impending attack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Two &amp; Three ~ Complex Sentence&lt;br&gt;Upper Grades ~ Complex Sentence with Metaphor</td>
<td>As the fire alarm sounded, the students hustled toward the exit. After the tobacco chewing lefty fired a belt-high fastball over the middle of the plate, the mighty David Ortiz launched a rocket toward the bullpen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Two &amp; Three ~ Compound-Complex&lt;br&gt;Upper Grades ~ Compound-Complex</td>
<td>*Not recommended for grades two and three unless you have an advanced group. When my brother slammed his backpack on the kitchen floor, it caused an earthquake that registered 9.9 on the Richter scale, and with steam and ash venting from her ears, Mom sent him to his room faster than you could say Mount St. Helens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Two &amp; Three ~ Appositive&lt;br&gt;Upper Grades ~ Appositive&lt;br&gt;Upper Grades ~ Relative Clause&lt;br&gt;Upper Grades ~ Absolute Phrase</td>
<td>Sasha, my best friend, snores like a diesel engine at idle. The computer, my best friend and my worst enemy, awaits me. Our computer, which can be a best friend or a worst enemy, sits in the far corner of the congested bedroom that I share with my brother. His eyes sparkling, my Dad greeted me at the door.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Guidelines for Progression of FCAs: A Brief Overview**

These guidelines are explained in more detail on pages 91 and 92.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Lower Grade FCAs or First Step</th>
<th>Middle Grade FCAs or Second Step</th>
<th>Upper Grade FCAs or Third Step</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cap / end</td>
<td>Specific words</td>
<td>Specific words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Best words</td>
<td>One simile</td>
<td>One simile (no clichés)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One simile</td>
<td>Word order</td>
<td>Active voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Two subj. / w. adj.</td>
<td>Two subj. / adj. / prep.</td>
<td>Three subj. / adj. / prep.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One simile</td>
<td>One simile</td>
<td>Alliteration 3+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Best words</td>
<td>Alliteration 2+</td>
<td>Subj. / pred. / agree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Two pred. / w. phrases</td>
<td>Three pred. / w. phrases</td>
<td>Three pred. / w. phrases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One simile</td>
<td>Onomatopoeia</td>
<td>Onomatopoeia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Best words</td>
<td>Comma (2)</td>
<td>Verb tenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two sentences</td>
<td>Two sentences</td>
<td>Two sentences / comma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Best words</td>
<td>Personification</td>
<td>Personification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comma</td>
<td>Comma</td>
<td>Verb tenses ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Complex</td>
<td>Complex / comma ?*</td>
<td>Complex / comma ?*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Metaphor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comma ?</td>
<td>Verb tenses ?*</td>
<td>Subjunctive (If)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Not recommended in lower grades</td>
<td>CCX / 2S / 1DC **</td>
<td>CCX / 2S / 1+DC **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hyperbole</td>
<td>Hyperbole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Commas ?*</td>
<td>Commas ? / Verb tenses ?*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Appositive</td>
<td>Relative clause</td>
<td>Absolute phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commas (2)</td>
<td>Run-on ?*</td>
<td>Run-on ?*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metaphor ?*</td>
<td>Paradox</td>
<td>Paradox</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

?* Ask yourself the questions: Do I need commas? Should I stay in the same verb tense? (You can begin to address the issue of switching tenses.) Would a metaphor work? Is the sentence run-on?

** CCX stands for compound-complex sentence. S is for simple sentence. DC is dependent clause.
What Does the Sentence Building Look Like in the Classroom?

Let me begin with a disclaimer. No lesson ever goes according to plan, and this is a good thing. The script below is written to give you an idea of how a lesson might evolve. Remember, as a teacher, you are an artist, not a scientist. Be yourself. Show your artistry. Adjust the script.

Materials: Each student has the template on the preceding page. The template has a back side for a quiz. The teacher needs something to write on at the front of the room: a board, overhead, flip chart, smart board, etc.

Brief introduction by the teacher, Rather than give long pieces of writing at the beginning of the year, we are going to work on a few important aspects of writing by building one sentence at a time. If we learn a few principles and skills and practice those until we know them and then move on to a few different principles and skills and practice by building one sentence at a time, we will learn a great deal about writing. This practice makes longer pieces much easier to complete because we will have learned what to do in many types of sentences. Does that make sense? I might make this longer. Most kids know E.B. White from his children’s stories. The fact that he is coauthor of the source of our content brings strength to the argument. I would bring his name into the introduction. Also, I would mention Will Strunk and his work at Cornell helping Ivy League students improve their writing by focusing on the sentence. I would talk about the problems my former students have had in writing and how this program helped them. In one to three minutes, share your experiences with writing, your reasoning for this important work, and show your enthusiasm for writing and sentence building.

On the front board, have the same information that is on the template.

Teacher, When we build our sentence, we are going to work on three aspects of writing. Pick up your pencil. Look at the top left of your template. You will see the letters FCA three times. FCA stands for Focus Correction Area. These are short rubrics used in connection with the Collins Writing Program. It means this is what we are learning — this is what is going to be corrected on this paper. Our first FCA is specific language. (In lower grades I use the word exact and explain it.) Write Specific language beside the first FCA. (Do the same on the board.) Go to the next FCA. Write One simile. (Do the same on the board.) Go to the last FCA. Write Cap/Period. (Do the same on the board.)

Here is a brief explanation of the first FCA, specific language. William Strunk and E.B. White tell us, “Use definite, specific, concrete language” (p. 15). This is our first rule of writing. Use exact words, not fuzzy or vague words. Use German shepherd, not dog. Use darted, not ran. Use maroon, not red. Get the idea?

Pick up your pencil. At the middle of your paper near the top it says sentence base and subject predicate. Put your finger on it. Write this sentence base. The car crashed. Car is the noun—subject. Remember noun — person, place, or thing. Crashed is the verb — predicate. It shows action. How many of you remember noun and verb?
**Seven Sentence Building Activities**

*First thing we are going to do is find a specific word for car. Can anyone give me a particular kind of car? (From the lowest grades, kids know cars, but they may not be that specific.)*

**Student,** Ford.

**Teacher,** Can you give me a particular model?


(If I have another adult in the classroom, I will ask her to jot these specific models on the board.)

**Teacher,** Okay, put your finger on the first line where it says noun-subject. Pick up your pencil. Write down your favorite car on the line. I’m going to put mine on the board.

(I want every kid to write. In most classes, I will have two to five kids who don’t write the name of a car on the template.)

**Teacher,** Anyone who did not write on the line, pick up your pencil and listen and get the name of a car from your classmates. Give me the names of cars you wrote.

**Student,** Cadillac CTS.

**Teacher,** Very specific car. Great.

(I do this for about five cars and tell the reluctant students to get the name of a car on the line.)

**Teacher,** Next, we are going to pick a color, not red, white, or blue. I want a specific color. Can you give me a specific color?


(After each of these, I say — great, very specific — much better than green or blue or black or red.)

**Teacher,** Pick up your pencil. Put your finger where you have an adjective right before the noun-subject. The adjective we are going to write here is the color of our car. Write down a specific adjective to describe your car. I’m going to put mine on the board.

(Again, I may have three to five who write nothing. But they will soon realize they are not going to slip by and write nothing. So I will again tell those who wrote nothing to pick up their pencils and listen as I have classmates read their adjectives and tell the reluctant students to write one down that they hear.)

**Teacher,** Go back to the first adjective. This could be a shape. For example, a Hummer H2 is boxy. A Corvette or other sports car could be low and sleek. However, the year of the car may determine the shape. Different years of cars have different shapes. The year might be the best adjective. For example, Corvettes from 1963–1967 had similar shapes, but the 1968 model changed dramatically. Pick up your pencil. Write down the shape or year of your car. I’m going to put mine on the board.

(Do I need to repeat for the nonwriters?)

**Next, go to article at the beginning of the sentence. Does anyone know the three articles?**

**Student,** A, an, and the.

**Teacher,** Great, a, an, and the are the three articles. (I write them on the board.)

**Teacher,** Select the article that sounds best and write it on the line. Next, does anyone know the best way to check your writing?
Student, *Read what you write out loud so you can hear it.*

Teacher, *Excellent, take what you have written and read it in a one-foot voice. This means you can hear it from one foot away. I’m going to read mine in a one-foot voice.* In a whisper, read . . . *The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe . . . Go to it. I should hear you mumbling. See if it sounds good and makes sense.*

Student, *Can I read mine?* (We are only a few words into the sentence, and the kids are realizing that what they have is special.)

Teacher, *I have time to hear three.* (I usually try to get one kid who I know will be great, one kid who never raises his hand, and one of the kids who had a blank but is now feeling good about this writing adventure.)

Student, *The 2003 forest green BMW Z3 . . .*

Teacher, *Excellent. Very specific. I can see it. You are drawing a picture with words.*

Student, *The 2008 midnight black Cadillac Escalade with chrome wheels . . . can I put in with chrome wheels?*

Teacher, *I think you just did. I think it sounds good. It’s clear, specific. Great job, leave it in there.*

Teacher, *Next, we go to the verb predicate crashed. Crashed is a specific verb, but let’s get something even more specific. It could be a tap, or a rub against another car, or a moderate accident, or a severe collision. What do you have for a more specific word than crashed?*


Teacher, *Put your finger where it says verb-predicate. Write your specific verb on the line. Ready, read what you have in a one-foot voice to see if it sounds good and makes sense. Here, I’ll read mine. The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe slammed . . .* (At this point, I may need to have verbs repeated for those with blanks. I may also want to hear three or four more from the class.)

Teacher, *Next, we will add a simile. Similes make comparisons by using like or as. Here are a few similes. He is as quick as a lightning bug. She is as smart as a Jeopardy champ. The runner shot off the blocks like a rocket. The kindergartner walked like a ninety-year-old at a nursing home.*

*Take your verb and match your simile with it. Traded paint like what? Slammed like what? Crunched like what?*

Students, *Traded paint like two paintings in art class. Slammed like a wrecking ball. Bumped like two strangers on a train. Slugged the Camero like a boxer in the fifteenth round.*

Teacher, *Write your simile on the line.* (Some kids won’t have a simile, so you will need to have those who do have similes say theirs to give ideas to the other kids.) *Now, read what you have in*
Seven Sentence Building Activities

a one-foot voice to see if it sounds good and makes sense . . . I’ll read mine. The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe slammed like a wrecking ball . . . Okay, read yours in a one-foot voice.

Teacher, Often times your writing is asking you to tell more. This is called begging an explanation. I’m going to read mine and see if it is asking me to explain more. Then I am going to have you do the same. Ready, here’s mine. The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe slammed like a wrecking ball . . . I think it’s asking me to tell what it hit. Read yours and see if it is begging you to tell more. If so, write it down. After doing this I would say, Okay, read what you have in a one-foot voice. Does it make sense? Does it sound good? The simile may sound better if you move it to the end of sentence.

Teacher, I’m going to read mine in two ways. Here’s what I have now. The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe slammed like a wrecking ball into the guardrail on Route 3 in Marshfield. Let me see how it sounds if I move the simile to the end. The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe slammed into the guardrail on Route 3 in Marshfield like a wrecking ball. What do you think? Which way sounds better? (I might read this several times to them. Then I would ask them to do the same with their sentences. This issue of moving words around will come up again in our sentence building. Strunk and White have sage advice on the matter.)

At the end, I address spelling.

Teacher, Check your sentence. Give me any words you can’t spell. I’ll spell them for you on the board.

This spelling on the board does a few things. It gives kids a correct visual of the word. It makes them do more editing. It also fixes errors I don’t have to deal with when correcting papers, thus making correction faster for me. Most of all, students are spelling words correctly again and again, and they will become better spellers.

When I return papers, I want to make the home link.

Teacher, Your parents would love to see these great sentences. They are refrigerator material. Put them on the fridge. Challenge Mom or Dad to building a sentence. Teach them a lesson. How often do you see your grandparents? Well, read them a couple of your sentences over the phone. If the papers appear to need rewriting, I would have them do the rewriting at the bottom.

A few thoughts on topics for your sentence bases:

First, I would ask students for sentence bases. This does at least two things. It gives them topics that they have selected and find interesting, and, by having them think of sentence bases, it also gets them to understand a sentence is composed of a subject and predicate.

Two, consider making it cross disciplinary. So if you are studying dinosaurs, you could ask for a sentence base on dinosaurs. This would allow them to work in their content knowledge and practice their writing skills.

On page 89, I include a list of sample sentence bases, and on page 90, a list of topics for cross disciplinary sentence building.