

# SENTENCE COMBINING

Making Sentence-Level Connections through Writing

# The Basic Idea

- Instructors will use sentence templates designed to give students
  - a more sophisticated understanding of the logic of sentence structure;
  - greater mastery of the subject matter of the course.

# Origins of the Idea

- First publicized by an article in the *Atlantic*, October 2012: “The Writing Revolution,” by Peg Tyre, about an underperforming school: New Dorp High School, Staten Island.
- School adopted a method of teaching writing developed by English teacher Judith Hochman (now known as the Hochman Method).
- Pass rates on state exams that included essay questions rose from 67% to 89%.
- Graduation rates went from 63% to almost 80%.

# The Hochman Method

- Based on the recognition that teaching grammar out of a textbook is almost useless.
- Based on the idea that the way for students to learn sentence structure—to grasp the logic of the sentence—is to give them sentence templates.

# Important Note

- The Hochman Method includes not only sentence-level templates but also paragraph- and essay-level templates.
- The latter are referred to in the following film, but we won't be using them.

# “The Writing Code”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8Q5MaqO5Ig> YouTube video

# Notes on the Film

- Again, we will not be adopting all parts of the Hochman Method referred to in the video—just the sentence-level parts.
- Note that both very bright-seeming and less bright-seeming students claim to have benefited from the method.
- If this approach seems too elementary for college, note that the New Dorp teachers thought it was too elementary for high school.

# Expected Benefits

- For students still struggling with basic sentence structure, the method will provide clarity.
- For students who have mastered sentence structure, the method will give them a more sophisticated understanding of the sentence.
- Whether or not they need instruction in sentence structure, all students will benefit in terms of mastering course content.



# Other Benefits

- Reading improvement. (Students often struggle with the complex sentences they encounter in college-level reading. This method will help them understand those sentences.)
- Speaking skills improve as well.
- Also analytical thinking skills.

# Analytical Skills

- The analytical skills required to produce an effective sentence are not unlike those required to produce an effective essay.
- By learning how to connect ideas in a sentence, students learn how to connect ideas in paragraphs and essays.
- Bruce Saddler: Sentences are “literally miniature compositions.”

# Why Should This Method Be Adopted in Content Classes?

- Writing skills are best taught in meaningful contexts.
- Also, the templates will help students master course material.
- Finally, the templates will produce extremely short writings that instructors can occasionally collect to monitor students' understanding.

# Implementation

- Faculty volunteering to implement this method will be asked to use four sentence templates.
- Brief descriptions of these templates follow.
- More in-depth explanations of these templates will be provided to faculty volunteers.

# Template 1: “Because,” “But,” “So”

- In this exercise, you give students a sentence related to your subject matter and ask them to add to it using these three words.
- Example:
  - George Gershwin is consider a musical genius \_\_\_\_\_.
  - because he captured the spirit of American life in his rhythms, harmonies, and melodies.
  - but some have criticized him for the structural weaknesses of some of his works.
  - so many composers have tried to emulate his style.

# Activity 2: Subordination

- Give students stems consisting of subordinating clauses and ask them to finish the sentence.
- (Subordinating clauses are groups of words that have a subject and a verb and begin with a subordinating conjunction: *for, because, when, whenever, if, as if, unless, etc.*)
- In the following examples, the stem you would give the student is underlined, and the student's response is italicized:
  - If a mid-segment touches a side, *then it bisects it.*
  - After Radical Reconstruction ended, *prewar power structures reemerged.*

# Activity 3: Appositives

- Through a variety of means, have students create sentences with appositives (underlined in the examples below).
  - Natural selection, a process of evolution, results in species with favorable traits.
  - Wind energy, a renewable resource, can produce electricity to power a city.
  - The Southern Renaissance, a period of literary productivity associated with the interwar period, produced many fine writers.

# Activity 4: Sentence Combining

- Give students simple sentences and ask them to combine the sentences into one.
- For example, you might give students these simple sentences:
  - The periodic table is a chart of chemical elements.
  - The chart displays the elements in horizontal rows.
  - They are displayed horizontally in order of increasing atomic numbers.
  - They are displayed vertically in order of the structural similarity of their atoms.
- Students might produce this: *The periodic table, a chart of chemical elements, displays elements horizontally in order of increasing atomic number and vertically in order of the structural similarity of their atoms.*



# How to Use in the Classroom

- At beginning of class about assigned reading or to stimulate discussion.
- Mid-class or end-of-class check on comprehension

# How to Evaluate Them?

- Read them over and comment extensively on content and form.
- Read them over and make notes on any general misunderstandings of the material or errors in sentence structure: address with entire class.
- Put one or two of the best responses on the board and discuss them.