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# THE POWER OF SENTENCE WRITING:

4 High-Leverage Instructional  
Practices to Incorporate  
Across Content Areas

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## BRIDGING RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Proficient writing is a cornerstone of effective communication, empowering individuals to express ideas clearly, convey information accurately, and connect with diverse audiences. To write any composition, writers engage in many processes as they effectively plan what to say, generate text through handwriting or electronic means, and revise their work to make improvements. However, “of all the tools a writer stocks his or her toolkit with, one of the most basic, yet most critical, is the ability to **construct sentences**” (Saddler, 2019). This is the foundation on which all composition skills are built.

“The ability to craft a good sentence is the necessary foundation for all good writing.”  
- Hochman & Wexler, 2017

When developing sentence composition skills, knowledgeable educators integrate non-negotiable best practices with high-leverage instructional practices.

## NON-NEGOTIABLE BEST PRACTICES FOR SENTENCE COMPOSITION

**#1 ) Oral language develops written language.** Oral and written language share a reciprocal relationship meaning as students develop and enhance their oral language skills, their written language skills develop, and vice versa. Therefore, effective sentence-level instruction is multimodal – embedding speaking, listening, reading and writing. In practice, teachers serve as strong models of academic syntax, require complete sentences in oral responses, and engage in practice activities that include both oral and written responses. As students develop their syntactic maturity through oral language, their understanding will more easily transfer into written production.

**#2 ) Explicit and systematic instruction develops mastery.** A bedrock of structured literacy instruction is explicit and cumulative instruction, and both are instrumental in sentence composition instruction. Effective instruction requires teachers to directly teach what they expect students to learn, and they follow a scope and sequence, or sentence hierarchy, that begins with simple structures and moves into more complex structures over time with mastery.

A **sentence hierarchy** (Jennings & Haynes, 2018) demonstrates how sentences move from their most basic form (noun + verb) to more complex structure. Teachers can use this hierarchy to inform sentence level instruction in gradual steps.

STRUCTURE	EXAMPLE
Noun (N) + Verb (V)	Water fills the measuring cup.
N + V + “where phrase” (where)	The liquid rises in the graduated cylinder.
Adjective (Adj) + N + V	The clear liquid overflows.
Adj + N + V + where + “when phrase” (when)	The tall beaker overflows in the sink during the experiment.
Adj + N + where + <i>and</i> + N + V + where	The large beaker is on the table, and the measuring cup is in the sink.
Adj + N + V + where + <i>but</i> + N + V	The graduated cylinder holds water on the table, but the beaker overflows.
Adj + N + V + where + <i>because</i> + N + V	The large beaker overflows on the table because the student pours too much water.
“When clause,” + Adj + N + V + where	When the liquid reaches the maximum level, the full beaker overflows onto the counter.
Adj + N + V where + “ <i>who/which/that</i> clause”	The graduated cylinder stands on the table, which displays precise volume measurements.
Adj + N “ <i>who/which/that</i> clause” + V	The tall beaker that holds 500 milliliters spilled.

Adapted from Jennings & Haynes, 2018



## AIM SCOPE AND SEQUENCE FOR SENTENCE STRUCTURE

**Key:** I = Introduce; P = Practice; A = Apply

Content	Examples	K	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>
<b>Sentence Types</b>							
Declarative (statement)	<i>The girl scored a goal in the game.</i>	I	P	A	A	A	A
Interrogative (question)	<i>Did she score a goal in the game?</i>		I	P	P	P	A
Exclamatory (exclamation)	<i>She scored!</i>		I	P	P	P	A
Imperative (command)	<i>Score a goal.</i>		I	P	P	P	A
<b>Simple Sentences</b>	<b>One independent clause (I)</b>						
Subject (noun) + Predicate (verb)	<i>The teacher spoke.</i>	I	P	P	A	A	A
Subject (adjective + noun) + Predicate (verb)	<i>The enthusiastic teacher spoke.</i>		I	I	I	P	P
Subject (noun) + Predicate (verb + adverb)	<i>The teacher spoke in the classroom.</i>			I	I	P	P
Subject (adjective + noun) + Predicate (verb + adverb)	<i>The enthusiastic teacher spoke in the classroom.</i>			I	I	P	P
Compound Subjects (noun/pronoun) + Predicate (verb)	<i>The teacher and the student worked on the project.</i>		I	P	P	A	A

This K-5 **scope and sequence** for sentence structure, from [AIM Pathways to Proficient Writing](#), outlines when each skill is typically introduced, practiced, and applied across grade levels.

**Contextualized writing experiences develop both reading comprehension and written expression.** Effective teachers provide students with ample opportunities to write about what they read. Therefore, sentence-level writing instruction should be contextualized in meaningful, theme-centered content based on current learning across content areas. The contextualized practice facilitates the critical reading and writing connection highlighted by Nancy Hennessy, Steven Graham and many other researchers and practitioners.

# HIGH-LEVERAGE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

Employing sentence-level instruction can have significant gains for both oral and written language development. Explore four easy to use, high-leverage activities that can be used in any classroom, across content areas, right away! Each activity includes scaffolded variations to differentiate the amount of support provided. Notice how all examples are contextualized within the core work happening in classrooms at [AIM Academy](#). The first set comes from a 5th-grade novel study of *The One and Only Ivan*, and the second set comes from a middle school science unit on “Reading Liquid Measures and Volume”.

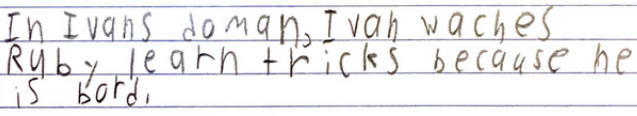
## #1 SENTENCE MONITORING

Sentence monitoring develops syntactic awareness of permissible sentence structures. This practice is particularly beneficial for English learners who are acquiring sentence structures that vary from their heritage language.


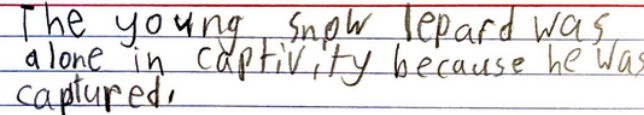
**HOW TO:** First, the teacher displays a sentence pattern from the sentence hierarchy (see Page 3), either with the parts of speech (adjective + noun + verb) or the function words that each part of speech represents (describer + who + do; describer + name + action) and then states a sentence aloud or displays a written sentence. Students determine if the example sentence follows the sentence pattern or if it fails to do so. If the sentence does not follow the pattern, students add, delete or rearrange words to ensure it follows the target pattern. With practice, students can generate their own sentence to match a given pattern, and eventually, students internalize the sentence structure and generalize the skills to their composition writing.

“Reading and writing are connected at the most intimate level. We write so others will read, and read what others write.” *-Graham, 2020*



The One and Only Ivan Prompt	The One and Only Ivan Extended Response
<p>Identify the sentence that follows the pattern.</p> <p><b>Where + Noun + Verb + Why</b></p> <p>In the mall, Bob jumps on Ivan's belly because it is comfortable.</p> <p>Bob jumps up and down on Ivan's belly at the mall.</p>	
Reading Liquid & Volume Prompt	Reading Liquid & Volume Response
<p>Generate a sentence that follows the sentence pattern:</p> <p><b>Adj + N + V + where + <i>because</i> + N + V</b></p> <p>Type a response</p>	<p>Plastic graduated cylinders help in laboratories because scientists can measure the volume of liquids.</p>

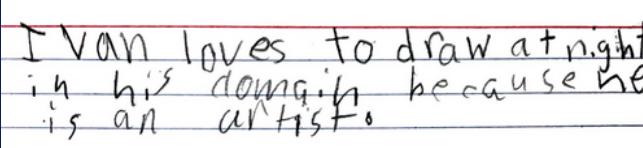
**SCAFFOLDED SUPPORT:** Images or visuals from the curriculum can support students in writing thematic sentences. This support can be especially effective for students with limited language or those who experience retrieval challenges.

The One and Only Ivan Prompt	The One and Only Ivan Response
<p>Write a sentence about the picture that follows the pattern below.</p> <p><b>Adj + N + V + where + why</b></p> 	

## #2 SENTENCE EXPANSION

Sentence expansion requires students to expand on kernel sentences by adding words, phrases or clauses. By elaborating on these kernel sentences, students are accessing and demonstrating command of content knowledge in addition to developing advanced syntactic knowledge.

**HOW TO:** First, the teacher displays a basic kernel sentence (noun + verb). Then, students expand the thought by answering *when?* *where?* *why?* and/or *how?* questions.

The One and Only Ivan Prompt	The One and Only Ivan Response
Expand the sentence using the prompts. Ivan loves to draw. When: Where: Why: Expanded sentence:	
Reading Liquid & Volume Prompt	Reading Liquid & Volume Response
Expand the sentence using the question words. Water can be measured. How? Why? <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-top: 10px;">Type a response</div>	Water can be measured using a graduated cylinder to determine the density.

**SCAFFOLDED SUPPORT:** Sentence frames and sentence stems guide students toward incorporating specific grammatical elements, such as adjectives, adverbs, phrases or clauses, to enhance their sentences. These scaffolds can be fill-in-the-blank where students generate the missing word or phrase or they can include prompting with a question word or part of speech for more support.



**Sentence Stem: The One and Only Ivan Example**

 Ivan paints in his cage.

<b>NOUN</b> Who? What?	<b>VERB</b> Does? Did what?	<b>ADVERB/PHRASE</b> When? Where? Why? How?
<i>Ivan</i>	<i>paints</i>	<i>so he can express his feelings.</i>

**Sentence Frame Template: Function Words**

<b>Which one?</b> <b>What kind?</b> <b>How many?</b>	<b>Who?</b> <b>What?</b>	<b>Is or was</b> <b>doing?</b>	<b>What?</b>	<b>When?</b> <b>Where?</b> <b>How?</b> <b>Why?</b>

**Sentence Frame Template: Parts of Speech**

<b>Adjective</b>	<b>Noun</b>	<b>Verb</b>	<b>Adverb</b>

## #3 SENTENCE STEMS WITH CONJUNCTIONS

Creating sentence stems that contain one independent clause followed by a conjunction can be an excellent way to introduce and practice compound sentences. Stems help students understand how to use conjunctions (but, and, so, etc.) to show relationships between two clauses (contrast, addition, cause and effect, etc.).

**HOW TO:** First the teacher displays an independent clause followed by a conjunction. Using the conjunction as a guide, students then add a second clause to complete the sentence.

The One and Only Ivan Prompt	The One and Only Ivan Response
Complete the sentence! Stella died because... Stella died, but... Stella died, so...	<div>Stella died but Mack just cared about money.</div> <div>Stella died, so Ruby was heart broken.</div>
Reading Liquid & Volume Prompt	Reading Liquid & Volume Response
Complete the sentences. Focus on the specific connecting words. Graduated cylinders are used to measure liquid because... Graduated cylinders are used to measure liquid, but... Graduated cylinders are used to measure liquid, so... <div>Type a response</div>	Graduated cylinders are used to measure liquid, but we can also use beakers or a measuring cup.  Graduated cylinders are used to measure liquid, so we use them when we need accurate scientific measurements.

# CLASSROOM VISUAL: UNDERSTANDING CONJUNCTIONS

**AND** → Adds an idea

I had eggs for breakfast, and I also had pancakes.



**BUT** → Shows a change or difference

I wanted to play outside, but it was raining.

**SO** → Shows a cause and effect

We left ice cream on the table, so it melted.



**BECAUSE** → Tells why

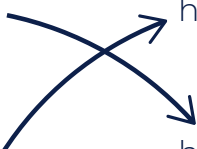
We went to bed early because we were tired.

A visual resource like this helps reinforce the meaning of conjunctions which can support not only sentence composition but also reading comprehension.

**SCAFFOLDED SUPPORT:** Word/phrase banks can reduce cognitive load by allowing students to devote attention to the conjunction and locating the option that matches the corresponding relationship.

**Match the first clause on the left with the appropriate second clause on the right.**

Ivan loves painting, and he can't find the materials he needs.  
 Ivan loves painting, but he uses bold colors to express his emotions.



## #4 SENTENCE COMBINING

Sentence combining is a more advanced sentence-level activity that requires students to merge two or more sentences into one cohesive, grammatically correct sentence. Since there is often more than one solution, this activity facilitates syntactic flexibility or the understanding that sentences can be organized effectively in a variety of ways.

**HOW TO:** First the teacher displays two short, simple sentences. Students learn to combine the key ideas into one sentence by changing, adding or removing words, capitalization and punctuation. For more support, specific requirements can be provided based on where students are in the scope and sequence. For example, combine the sentences into a compound sentence using the connecting word 'but.'

The One and Only Ivan Prompt	The One and Only Ivan Response
Combine the sentences! Animals live in captivity. Animals are stressed and anxious.	<p>Animals live in captivity, so they are stressed and anxious.</p> <p>Some animals that live in captivity are stressed and anxious.</p>
Reading Liquid & Volume Prompt	Reading Liquid & Volume Response
Combine the sentences using any of the following: although, while, and, but, or Liquid is measured in a graduated cylinder. We look at the meniscus to measure.	<p>Liquid is measured in a graduated cylinder so we look at the meniscus to measure.</p> <p>Liquid is measured in a graduated cylinder, and we look at the meniscus to measure.</p>

**SCAFFOLDED SUPPORT:** Two types of scaffolded clues, underlined clues or a keyword in parentheses, can support students to “think about language in a very precise way, while also providing enough practice in using a particular combination to make them comfortable applying it in their writing. (Saddler, 2012).”

**Underlined clue:** Two sentences are provided. The second sentence contains an underlined word to demonstrate that the word must be included when forming a newly combined sentence.

**Combine the sentences. Remember to incorporate the underlined word.**

Ivan loves to paint.

Ivan is an artist.

**Example responses:**

Ivan is an artist who loves to paint.

Ivan is an artist, so he loves to paint.

**Keyword in parentheses:** Two sentences are provided. A connecting keyword in parentheses signals that the word must be used to combine the two thoughts into one sentence.

**Combine the sentences. Remember to incorporate the word in parentheses.**

Ivan loves to paint.

He paints with bold colors. (and)

**Example response:**

Ivan loves to paint, and he uses bold colors.

As students grow proficient with the task, three or more sentences can be included with underlined and/or keyword clues, and eventually all clues are removed.

# CONCLUSION

Writing is an extremely complex task and relies on a variety of low and high-level language and cognitive skills. As a result of writing's complexity, it takes a longer period of time to become proficient. Sentences lay the foundation for writing, and students need explicit instruction and practice to develop the skills necessary to produce meaningful and cohesive sentences. By utilizing the above instructional practices consistently, in alignment with the non-negotiables presented, students internalize the patterns and mechanics of writing a variety of sentences, improving their overall writing fluency and ability to express ideas effectively in lengthy compositions. With strong foundational writing skills in place, students will grow better equipped to produce the pieces of writing required in our 21st century world.

“[Sentence level instruction] is the engine that will propel your students from writing the way they speak to using the structures of written language.” *-Hochman & Wexler, 2017*

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## SENTENCE COMPOSITION IS JUST ONE PIECE OF THE **WRITING PUZZLE**

Unlock the full picture with **Pathways to Proficient Writing**. AIM's evidence-based professional learning experience equips educators with practical strategies, real-world examples, and student-facing tools to strengthen instruction and empower students as confident writers. Explore how small shifts can lead to a big impact in your classroom.

### WHAT EDUCATORS HAVE TO SAY

"The course was outstanding. I learned so much about the connection between reading and writing."

"The content is in-depth and applicable across contents. The resources are explicit and support developing and implementing writing expectations and protocols."

"The digital coursework had lots of great information. Our instructor for the VCOP meetings was very nice and engaging."

"I love the ability to work through the course at my own pace, and especially appreciate the ready-to-use resources as well as the video model lessons."

"I love the platform for the online course, it's so easy to navigate and engaging. My favorite part of the VCOPs is when the facilitators/others share real life strategies that we can implement in our classrooms."

"I really appreciated the combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning. Having an opportunity to be reflective in my practice and meet with others has really increased my understanding of the writing process. I look forward to implementing the new strategies with students and staff."



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AIM Institute for Learning & Research was launched alongside AIM Academy in 2006 with a vision to bridge the gap between research and classroom practice. We recognized that literacy research could help teachers better serve children struggling to read, but it wasn't reaching the classroom. AIM strives to connect research to practice through AIM Pathways educator training rooted in evidence-based best practices, creating a hub where top researchers and practitioners can advance literacy together.

## MISSION

Develop a center for educational excellence and professional development to disseminate best practices to educators by providing access to the latest research-based curriculum, technology, and training.

Provide extraordinary educational opportunities to children with language-based learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, utilizing research-based intervention strategies and an arts-based learning environment that is college preparatory in scope and sequence.

## CORE PURPOSE

We transform and empower lives through literacy.

## CORE VALUES

- Research to Practice
- Fearless Innovation
- Partner for Impact
- Transform the Future of Education



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