Conventional Wisdom
Helping Middle School Writers Master Mechanics

Presented By

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Be a Better Writer

For School, For Fun, For Anyone Ages 10-15

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Tips and Techniques
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Part of the Be a Better Writer Series

by
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with
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Don't keep your readers waiting; give them things to read. Don't wait for someone to discover you; discover yourself. Don't wait to be a better writer...

Be a Better Writer Now!
To see how it works, look at this well-structured sentence:

On a bitter January morning, Malcolm Maxwell, a young man of meager means but grand ambitions, left the quiet country town in which he’d been raised, and set off on the bold errand he’d been preparing for all his life.

Here’s what it looks like when we break it into parts.

★ Main Part. Describes the MAIN action in the sentence: “Malcolm Maxwell... left the quiet country town in which he’d been raised...”

★ Intro Part. Introduces the MAIN part: “On a bitter January morning...”

★ In-Between Part. Splits the MAIN part; feels like an interruption: “...a young man of meager means but grand ambitions...”

★ Add-On Part. Provides additional information about the MAIN part: “...and set off on the bold errand he’d been preparing for all his life.”

Once we’ve labeled the parts, we describe the structure like this:

**INTRO + MAIN + IN-BETWEEN + MAIN + ADD-ON**

Here are the parts in order:

★ **INTRO**: “On a bitter January morning,”

★ **MAIN**: “Malcolm Maxwell,”

★ **IN-BETWEEN**: “a young man of meager means but grand ambitions,”

★ **MAIN**: “left the quiet country town in which he’d been raised,”

★ **ADD-ON**: “and set off on the bold errand he’d been preparing for all his life.”

Understanding sentence structure helps you:

1. **Find problems.** We all have problems with our sentences, but the real problem is when our readers find them before we do—especially when those readers are our teachers. When you have a way of analyzing sentences, however, even if teachers mark you down, you can ask them to explain the problems they see in terms you understand.

2. **Fix problems.** Finding problems is good; fixing problems is better. When you think you’re having a problem, start by isolating the MAIN part of the sentence and writing that out separately. Then add other parts around it as needed. Don’t put them in unless you really need them. Sometimes you can leave parts out or move them into sentences of their own. Regardless of what’s wrong, finding the MAIN part of a sentence and working to make the rest of the sentence simpler is the best way to fix it.

3. **Improve beginnings, lengths, and structures.** Variety is the key to creating groups of sentences readers enjoy. Knowing how to analyze and manipulate the parts of sentences is the key to creating variety.

4. **Clarify of your ideas.** Each of the four sentence parts matches a type of information you convey in your sentences. You present your ideas more clearly when you know how each part contributes to what you want your readers to understand.

5. **Express your voice.** Previously, I said that Voice = Word Choice + Sentence Structure. Understanding how to use the four sentence parts gives you more control over the fluency, or flow, of your sentences. Once you know how to do this, you can project your voice more confidently in your writing through both word choice and sentence structure.

6. **Use the best structures from the writing you like most.** For me, the biggest advantage of learning how to analyze sentences is being able to write sentences similar to those of the great writers I read. As you’ll discover in the next few pages, the approach you just learned for analyzing sentences will help you write sentences you might not be able to write otherwise.
Learn From the Best

Your best writing teachers are the writers you read. This is true for any aspect of writing, but it's especially true for sentences because sentence writing is one of the hardest things to teach and to learn.

What if you could produce sentences with the same solid structures as the best sentences you read? In this section, this is what you'll learn to do.

Start by taking another look at our first example sentence, but in a slightly different format that makes both the structure and the content easy to see at the same time:

On a bitter January morning, Malcolm Maxwell, a young man of meager means but grand ambitions, left the quiet country town in which he'd been raised, and set off on the bold errand he'd been preparing for all his life.

No matter how long and complicated this sentence is, you can create your own sentences just like it by following the pattern of parts it contains. The pattern for this sentence is:

INTRO + MAIN + IN-BETWEEN + MAIN + ADD-ON

In the next three sections, I'll show you a set of patterns that I know you'll find very useful. There are ten patterns in this collection, but you can write almost anything you need to write if you master just the first six. Think about this for a moment: Your entire sentence writing life can be wrapped up neat and tidy with just six sentence patterns. And none of them takes much time to learn.

Here's a sentence with the same structural patterns that uses different content:

The day after my birthday, my best friend, someone I had known almost all my life, lied to me about why she didn't come to my party, and I've never been able to forgive her for that.

Here's another one:

On August 12, 1945, Harry Truman, a modest man of accidental aspirations, was summoned to the White House, and informed that he was now one of the most powerful people on Earth.

You can see that these sentences share the same structure. Can you hear that structure, too? This is what matters most: reading different sentences that share the same pattern—and hearing the pattern! Hearing sentence patterns is the key to sentence sense.

Gradually, you'll begin to recognize the parts as you read them, just like you recognize parts in a song. Soon, you won't need the patterns; great sentences will be part of the way you write.
A Sentence-Pattern Story

Sentence patterns are tools in your writer’s toolbox. Just like an auto mechanic or a carpenter, the more tools you have, and the more experience you have using them, the better and easier your work becomes.

Here I’ll introduce you to 10 sentence patterns with a tiny story I made up about a tired teacher, a magic dog, and an unusual day at school.

**FUNSTON TAKES A HOLIDAY**

As he walked slowly to the front of the class, Mr. Funston dreamed of Christmas vacation. He stared at the blank faces of his students, perplexed that he had nothing whatsoever to teach them today.

The Lesser Antilles, Mr. Funston realized, would be the perfect place for a warm winter hiatus. He saw himself on the beach, baking in the midday sun, his trusty dog trotting to and from the hotel with tasty snacks and refreshing beverages.

Having dismissed his students early to lunch, Mr. Funston sat at his computer, hunting and pecking his way to a good deal on a two-week vacation in the West Indies. He leaned back in his big teacher chair, having forgotten about the 12 pounds he’d put on at Thanksgiving, and tumbled into the Halloween bulletin board he’d neglected to take down.

Awakening in a daze, unable to recall his name or occupation, Mr. Funston staggered out of school, and headed for the airport. As if by some miracle of mind reading, his resourceful canine companion met him there, carrying a large suitcase in his mouth, and struggling with a small beach umbrella in his curled tail. The happy pair dashed down the jet way, dreaming of warm sand between their toes, until it became apparent, as a determined stewardess moved toward them, that dogs with beach umbrellas could not ride in first class.

In spite of a harrowing day of job quitting, mind reading, temporary amnesia, and complicated international travel, 24 hours later, Funston and his canine companion, tired and hungry from a morning romp on the beach, found a rock where they could eat their lunch, and began to unpack their sandwiches, encouraged by a friendly flock of seagulls who invited themselves to the party.

The 10 sentences in this story use 10 different sentence patterns. They start out short and simple, becoming longer and more complicated as the story progresses. The sentences have different beginnings and different lengths, as well as good contrast and strong progression. This is exactly what readers want in a group of sentences.

### 10 Patterns That Will Make You a Better Writer

In this section, I’ll show you the structure of each sentence from *Funston Takes a Holiday* using the Plain English for Handy Analysis approach we just covered.

To show you how to practice these patterns, I’ll give you a different sentence, below the sentence from the story, which I’ve written using the same sentence pattern but different content.

This is the process I encourage you to use as you look for sentences you like in the writing you read and take their structures to create sentences of your own.

The patterns you’ll find in this section will take you a long way. But the patterns you find on your own, because they sound good to you for whatever reason, are the ones you should concentrate on emulating with the Plain English for Handy Analysis approach.
PATTERN #1

INTRO + MAIN

As he walked slowly to the front of the class, Mr. Funston dreamed of Christmas vacation.

As he walked slowly to the front of the class, Mr. Funston dreamed of Christmas vacation.

With time running out in the fourth quarter, Steph Curry launched a 3-pointer for another Warrior win.

With time running out in the fourth quarter, Steph Curry launched a 3-pointer for another Warrior win.

It may seem silly to spend time practicing two-part sentences. Almost every writer writes them easily. But that’s exactly why we need to practice them.

The fact that two-part sentences come easily to us means that we don’t pay much attention to how we write them. Conscious practice helps us understand how these easy sentences serve as foundations for the more complicated sentences we aren’t yet as familiar with.

There are only two types of two-part sentences: INTRO + MAIN and MAIN + ADD-ON. These are the basic patterns to master—both in writing and in reading.

IN-BETWEEN parts are easy to spot when they interrupt the connection between any of the others. They only occur when a sentence has at least three parts and can often be removed or turned into ADD-ON parts.

PATTERN #2

MAIN + ADD-ON

He stared at the blank faces of his students, perplexed that he had nothing whatsoever to teach them today.

He stared at the blank faces of his students, perplexed that he had nothing whatsoever to teach them today.

She ran back to her room in tears, confused and angry that her father showed no interest in her extraordinary accomplishment.

She ran back to her room in tears, confused and angry that her father showed no interest in her extraordinary accomplishment.

I’m a big fan of ADD-ON parts, probably too big a fan. I love how flexible they are, how I can just add another one at the end without worrying that I’m making a mistake as long as I’ve already included the MAIN part.

There are two ways to add an ADD-ON: with a verb or with a conjunction. Both examples above kick off their ADD-ON part with verbs. Here’s what it looks like when you use a conjunction to add an ADD-ON:

We went to see the new horror movie, but it was so scary we had our eyes closed most of the time.
PATTERN #3
MAIN + IN-BETWEEN + MAIN

MAIN
The Lesser Antilles, Mr. Funston realized,

IN-BETWEEN
would be the perfect place for a warm winter

MAIN
hiatus.

The Lesser Antilles, Mr. Funston realized, would be the perfect place for a warm winter hiatus.

PATTERN #4
MAIN + ADD-ON + ADD-ON

MAIN
He saw himself on the beach, baking in the

ADD-ON
midday sun, his trusty dog trotting to and from the hotel with tasty snacks and refreshing beverages.

ADD-ON

He saw himself on the beach, baking in the midday sun, his trusty dog trotting to and from the hotel with tasty snacks and refreshing beverages.

Looking back over this book, I realize that in almost every paragraph, three-part sentences are the most complicated sentences I write. (Like that one, for example: INTRO + INTRO + MAIN.)

This surprises me. I thought I was a more sophisticated sentence stylist. In another way, however, I'm proud of this. My ideas are probably clearer and easier to understand than they would be if I used more complicated structures.

I'm a well-known over-writer. I probably write too much because I talk too much. Speaking with more discipline is difficult for me, but writing with more discipline is a matter of taking more time for revision and focusing on revising for sentence length and structure.
PATTERN #5
INTRO + MAIN + ADD-ON

Having dismissed his students early to lunch, Mr. Funston sat at his computer, hunting and pecking his way to a good deal on a two-week vacation in the West Indies.

With a small and poorly-trained army, General Washington moved his men frequently, ensuring that the British would never know where they might strike next.

You can get so much writing done with just one-, two-, and three-part sentences. Look at the books and other materials you're reading. I think you'll be surprised by how simple good writing is. To improve your sentence sense even more, identify these patterns in the writing you read. You'll be surprised how often they show up. (That was a MAIN + IN-BETWEEN + MAIN right there.)

PATTERN #6
MAIN + IN-BETWEEN + ADD-ON

He leaned back in his big teacher chair, having forgotten about the 12 pounds he'd put on at Thanksgiving, and tumbled into the Halloween bulletin board he'd neglected to take down.

Athena stared at her learning console, scanning her assignments, and realized that none of them interested her as much as the nagging feeling she had that something wasn't quite right.

One-, two-, and three-part patterns give you enough variation in beginnings, lengths, and structures to write just about anything. Write three practice sentences for each pattern each day for a week. I’ll bet you can master them in less than two hours total. Think about that: Two hours of practice sharpens your sentence sense and earns you a lifetime of well-constructed ideas.
PATTERN #7
INTRO + IN-BETWEEN + MAIN + ADD-ON

INTRO
Awakening in a daze, unable to recall his name or occupation, Mr. Funston staggered out of school, and headed for the airport.

Awakening in a daze, unable to recall his name or occupation, Mr. Funston staggered out of school, and headed for the airport.

Pretending to be asleep, hoping to avoid Mr. Funston’s head-achingly tedious pedagogical ministrations, Josh snored softly, intentionally drooling on his paper for added realism.

Pretending to be asleep, hoping to avoid Mr. Funston’s head-achingly tedious pedagogical ministrations, Josh snored softly, intentionally drooling on his paper for added realism.

We could analyze this pattern a different way if we wanted to. The IN-BETWEEN part could be a second ADD-ON part. The difference here is small, but this is where we can use what we know to think more like we would if we were studying traditional grammar.

I chose to call the second part an IN-BETWEEN part because I felt that it was not strictly necessary to the meaning of the sentence. But I think the first part is. Readers need to know that Funston is “awakening in a daze.” But they don’t need the added information that he was “unable to recall his name or occupation.”

PATTERN #8
INTRO + MAIN + ADD-ON + ADD-ON

INTRO
As if by some miracle of mind reading, his resourceful canine companion met him there, carrying a large suitcase in his mouth, and struggling with a small beach umbrella in his curled tail.

As if by some miracle of mind reading, his resourceful canine companion met him there, carrying a large suitcase in his mouth, and struggling with a small beach umbrella in his curled tail.

By the age of 4, she could recite the digits in Pi to 100 places, having had no formal math instruction, or knowing that Pi is the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter.

By the age of 4, she could recite the digits in Pi to 100 places, having had no formal math instruction, or knowing that Pi is the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter.

I like this pattern because it ends with ADD-ON parts. I don’t know if it makes my writing better, but I love using ADD-ON parts to include additional details readers don’t expect. When a string of ADD-ON parts comes at the end of a sentence, readers pay close attention to the information these parts convey.
PATTERN #9
MAIN + ADD-ON + ADD-ON + IN-BETWEEN + ADD-ON

The happy pair dashed down the jet way, dreaming of warm sand between their toes, until it became apparent, as a determined stewardess moved toward them, that dogs with beach umbrellas could not ride in first class.

Jordan walked the tracks for hours, wondering why her friends had come here, but it became eerily clear to her, as the calm of early evening became the anguish of night, that there was no more perfect place than this for troubled souls adrift in paradise.

He walked up hill in the mire by the side of the mail, as the rest of the passengers did, not because they had the least relish for walking exercise, under the circumstances, but because the hill, and the harness, and the mud, and the mail, were all so heavy that the horses had three times already come to a stop, besides once drawing the coach across the road, with the mutinous intent of taking it back to Blackheath.

—Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

The Long and the Longer of It
Like Pinocchio’s nose, sentences seem to be in more trouble the longer they get. Long sentences, like big words, have a certain allure; they are mysteriously attractive. We feel good when we write them, and when we write them well, our readers feel good, too.

In theory, a sentence can go on forever. Some writers can effortlessly tack on part after part. I’m not one of them. But I’m always trying to get better and that means taking risks. As I get up to five parts and more than 40 words, I start to sputter. I lose track of where I am and can’t easily get to where I’m going.

However, my struggles with long sentences need not be yours. The art of long sentence writing is a beautiful one. For some writers, long sentences are a vital part of their voice. One of these writers was Charles Dickens. His popular novels of the 19th century are probably read more today than when he wrote them.

One of the joys for me of reading Dickens—and other sentence specialists like William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, John Updike, or David Foster Wallace—is coming upon a long sentence, not realizing it until I’m half way in and starting to thirst for a mark of terminal punctuation, and then realizing that the author has it all under control to such a degree that I can just keep on reading and with no fear that I’ll hit a rough patch or be unable, when I get to the end, to remember what it was all about at the beginning.

Below you’ll find a 79-word sentence from Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities. Given the content, its length makes it sound hilarious to me, even though there’s a serious matter at hand involving a rough road, a large load of mail, and a set of cranky horses.
After spending months slogging through mud, rain, and snow, having faced the roughest day of travel anyone could remember, the Donner Party, delayed for months by mistakes and mishaps, reluctantly resolved to spend the winter of 1846-47 in the Sierra Nevada mountains, aware of the hardship this would bring, but entirely unaware of the fate to which they had condemned themselves.

Here’s a much-improved revision split into smaller sentences:

Delayed for months by mistakes and mishaps, the Donner Party reluctantly resolved to spend the winter of 1846-47 in the Sierra Nevada mountains. They’d spent months slogging through rain, mud, and snow, and had just endured the roughest day of travel anyone could remember. Aware of the hardship a mountain winter would bring, they were entirely unaware of the fate to which they had condemned themselves.
Sentence Sense and Sensibility

On a first read, the piece below might seem ordinary. Many of us have been to cabins on beaches with our families. Even the title is bland. What isn’t bland or obvious, though, is how this piece sounds and how easily it rolls along from sentence to smoothly-flowing sentence—and the wonderful ideas that this young writer, wise beyond his years, seems to appreciate.

OUR FAMILY CABIN AT THE BEACH

Sometimes, when I close my eyes, I can make believe it’s summer, and I’m back at our family cabin at the beach. I see the waves rolling over the squishy sand, feel the sand squish between my toes, and hear cries of surprise from my little sister as she picks up barnacle-covered rocks and squeals with delight at the scurrying sand crabs.

Everyone in the family enjoys this time together: my mom and dad, of course, and my little sister; my aunt and uncle and my cousins; even Grandma and Grandpa, though it’s harder now for them to make their way along the overgrown path to the cabin and to walk on the beach.

Each morning, we get up and head down to the shore to see what the tide brought in. It’s mostly driftwood, assorted shells, small pieces of seaweed, and long tangles of kelp. But sometimes something unusual awaits us. I once found a note in a bottle. It was actually just a piece of paper in a bottle with nothing written on it. For years, I’ve made up the story that a starving island castaway, deliriously hopeful about the possibility of rescue, put the paper in the bottle, and tossed it off with the outgoing tide, forgetting to write a note describing his location.

The world here is both familiar and new. No matter how many times I’ve walked along the water’s edge, waves breaking gently at my feet, I always find special rocks and tiny tide pools filled with creatures I can’t identify by name and that weren’t there the year before.

No matter what time of day it is, there’s always something to do. We play volleyball and badminton. We lay out in the sun and read. We snuggle up in warm blankets and toast marshmallows over a campfire while Dad and Grandpa take turns telling the same ghost stories we’ve heard so many times before that they’ve gone from being scary to being funny to being just another family ritual none of us wants to let go of.

Each year as we get ready to make the day-long drive to the ocean, I wonder if the magic will have worn off, if I will have finally outgrown our family cabin at the beach. But this never happens. The magic isn’t in the cabin, or the beach, it’s in the family.

I’m always a little sad when it’s time to go; I think everyone is. We say our good-byes. We talk about the fun we had. Then everyone drives off. As our car pulls out of the driveway, I turn to look out the back window. I slowly move my head from one side to the other as if to see everything around me so I can remember everything about it. Then I close my eyes to keep the memory safe until we return again next year.

Can you feel the ebb and flow, the gentle rock and simple rhythm, as the writer moves us comfortably through his piece sentence by sentence? I feel this most strongly in the final sentence of the fourth paragraph: 52 words without a single comma or any other mark of mid-sentence punctuation. This is not easy to do, but it’s certainly easy to read. That’s great sentence sense at work.
Your Checklist for Better Punctuation

You can see that this checklist is bigger than all the others. And it only covers the most frequently used rules of punctuation. One more reason I might have to write that big book I mentioned in the last chapter.

What’s valuable here are the questions after the “Ask yourself” phrases. These are the things to check in your writing. They’re also the things to check out in the books and other texts you read.

Effective punctuation involves using:

☑ End-of-sentence marks that show where ideas start and stop. Sentences are punctuated with a capital letter that begins every sentence and a period, question mark, or exclamation mark at the end. Ask yourself: Have I used capital letters and periods to show where my ideas begin and end? Have I remembered to put question marks at the ends of questions? Have I used exclamation marks sparingly, for excited utterances, only when I absolutely need them, and never more than one at a time?

☑ Middle-of-sentence marks that show where parts of ideas start and stop. Mid-sentence punctuation marks include the comma, dash, parentheses, colon, semicolon, and ellipsis. Ask yourself: Do I use commas to show where parts of sentences begin and end? Do I use dashes to emphasize IN-BETWEEN and ADD-ON parts of sentences? Do I use parentheses to de-emphasize IN-BETWEEN and ADD-ON parts? Do I use colons like an equals sign to show that one part of a sentence is an introduction to or description of another part? Do I use ellipses to show that part of a sentence is missing, that time has passed, or that something is repeating indefinitely?

☑ Capitalization that indicates important words. Capitalize names, places, and things that are one of a kind. Ask yourself: Have I capitalized the names of people, places, and things that are one-of-a-kind? Have I capitalized the word “I”? Have I capitalized the first word of each sentence? Have I capitalized first, last, and important words in titles?

☑ Paragraphs that group related ideas together. Paragraphs help readers follow your thinking by separating groups of related ideas. Ask yourself: Is my piece written in paragraphs? Have I used paragraphs to group related ideas? Have I remembered to indent if I’m using indented paragraphing or to skip a line if I’m using block paragraphing?

☑ Dialog punctuation that indicates who is speaking and what is being said. Dialog requires quotation marks, commas, and all the end-of-sentence marks. Ask yourself: Have I put quotation marks around only those words that are actually spoken? Have I put ending punctuation that goes with quoted words inside the final quotation marks? Have I started a new paragraph for each new speaker?

As I mentioned, this checklist doesn’t cover everything. It does, however, cover the most important five groups of punctuation: end-of-sentence punctuation, mid-sentence punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, and dialog. Knowing what these groups are provides a valuable shortcut to studying punctuation and to proofreading your writing.

Proofreading is a skill unto itself, and a highly-valued one at that. Good proofreaders make good money because, frankly, very few writers can do it well themselves. Most of us don’t have the knowledge. But there’s another important reason: After we’ve looked at our own work long enough to finish it, we have a hard time seeing even the most obvious mistakes.

This is the “curse of familiarity.” The only fix is to let writing sit until we forget it. For me, that’s about a month. But rarely do I feel like waiting that long between finishing a piece and releasing it. After I’ve done all the work of writing something, I’m too impatient to hold it back even for just a few days.

Most of the time, most of us don’t have proofreaders. When I don’t, I focus on the types of errors I make most often. (Leaving out small words like “the” and “and” is my biggest problem.) You can use this checklist the same way to identify the areas where you know you are most likely to make mistakes. Concentrate on fixing those when you take one last pass through your work.

The idea of taking a pass over the entire piece, concentrating on just one category of potential problems makes sense for two reasons: You’re more likely to find problems if they exist, and you’re highly likely to become a better proofreader if you take this kind of multi-pass approach regularly.
Punctuation Changes Almost Everything

Punctuation has more power than you think. Just as you use it to help your readers understand your work, you can easily mis-use it and accidentally change the meaning of your ideas in ways you’d never imagine.

Let me show you just how powerful punctuation is. One of the most famous novels in American literature starts with one of the most famous sentences in American literature:

**Call me Ishmael.**

Three words. That’s it. Why are these three words so famous? Because of the 206,049 words that come after them in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*.

Not much punctuation to worry about here: a capital letter to start the sentence, another capital letter for the guy’s name, a period at the end. In the original sentence, a guy is telling us his name. We also know that he’s the narrator of the story. Now look at what small changes in punctuation can do. (Just for the record, I’m including italics for emphasis, or underlining in this case, as a type of punctuation—because it is.) For example:

**“Call me, Ishmael.”**

This is a person telling Ishmael to give that person a call sometime—probably sooner rather than later.

**“Call me, Ishmael.”**

This is a person telling Ishmael to give that person a call instead of calling someone else. We often fall into this behavior when we think one person has responsibility for something but the responsibility lies with someone else who is tired of being nagged about it.

**“Call me, Ishmael.”**

This is a person telling Ishmael to give that person a call instead of using some other form of communication. (Maybe Morse code?)
Punctuation Reading

Most of us aren’t acutely aware of punctuation when we read. Because of this, we miss an opportunity to learn how it works. Remember the paragraph below from a previous chapter? Give it a read once again:

On a dark December night in 1776, as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy Delaware River, George Washington said, “Shift your fat behind, Henry. But slowly or you’ll swamp the darn boat.” He was talking to General Henry Knox. (They called him “Ox” for short.) There’s a painting of George Washington where he’s standing up in a boat scanning the riverbank for Redcoats. I always thought he just wanted a good view. But I guess the reason he was standing was because he didn’t have a place to sit down.

Now read it again like this:

NEW PARAGRAPH INDENT CAPITAL on a dark CAPITAL december night in 1776 COMMA as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy CAPITAL delaware CAPITAL river COMMA CAPITAL george CAPITAL washington said COMMA quote shift your fat behind COMMA hen CAPITAL hyphen ry PERIOD CAPITAL but slowly or you APOSTROPHE IF swamp the darn boat PERIOD QUOTE CAPITAL he was talk HYPHEN ing to CAPITAL general CAPITAL henry CAPITAL knox PERIOD PARENTHESIS CAPITAL they called him QUOTE CAPITAL ox QUOTE for short PERIOD PARENTHESIS CAPITAL there APOSTROPHE s a painting of CAPITAL george CAPITAL washington where he APOSTROPHE s stand HYPHEN ing up in a boat scanning the riverbank for CAPITAL redcoats PERIOD CAPITAL i al HYPHEN ways thought he just wanted a good view PERIOD CAPITAL but CAPITAL i guess the reason he was standing was because he didn APOSTROPHE t have a place to sit down PERIOD END OF PARAGRAPH

This is what reading is really like. Even though we don’t say the punctuation marks out loud, or even quietly in our heads, we use them as we read to make sense of what people write.

In that single 95-word paragraph, we encountered:

* Forty-eight marks of punctuation. And that doesn’t include other conventions like the correct spellings of 95 words and the correct use of 94 spaces.

* Ten different kinds of punctuation marks. New paragraph, indent, capital, comma, quote, hyphen, period, apostrophe, parenthesis, and end of paragraph.


I call this Punctuation Reading. Punctuation Reading helps you learn the names of the marks. It also helps you develop a sense for how they’re used in published writing. That’s important. Learning how to punctuate in punctuation exercises full of errors isn’t as valuable as learning how to punctuate in good writing that is error-free.

Miss Margot says...

I’m used to reading my writing out loud, but I never used to include the punctuation. When Mr. Peha first asked me to do it, I felt dumb. Then I started laughing. Now I think it’s fun. I bet you will, too.

There’s a lot to learn about punctuation even in a single paragraph. But is this a good way to read? No. It’s tedious and it’s hard to understand the words. However, reading like this for two-to-three minutes each day isn’t tedious at all, and it improves your knowledge of how punctuation is used in published writing.
Punctuation Inquiry

Punctuation Reading helps us recognize the marks. Punctuation Inquiry helps us learn how the marks are used. Once you’ve read through a passage and figured out the punctuation, figure out why it’s there. Focus on one mark used in many ways. Ask yourself questions about why and how it’s used.

In the paragraph we just read, capitalization would be a good choice.

On a dark December night in 1776, as he led a barefoot brigade of ragged revolutionaries across the icy Delaware River, George Washington said, “Shift your fat behind, Henry. But slowly or you’ll swamp the darn boat.” He was talking to General Henry Knox. (They called him “Ox” for short.)

There’s a painting of George Washington where he’s standing up in a boat scanning the riverbank for Redcoats. I always thought he just wanted a good view. But I guess the reason he was standing was because he didn’t have a place to sit down.

I’m choosing capitalization here because there are several places where words are capitalized for different reasons. You’ll learn the most from looking at different uses of the same mark.

On the facing page, you’ll see a table. Do I expect you to make one of these when you inquire about the use of punctuation in a published text? No. This is the kind of thing that I would make on the board with help from students in a classroom. It does, however, give you a simple format to think about punctuation while you’re inquiring into its use.

This is nothing more than a habit of mind. And it’s a good one to use in reading because it can be used to discover many things about a text, not just uses of punctuation.

Today, this process of looking closely at a text is called close reading in some schools. Back in the old days, we just called it “reading.” But things in education are fancier now, and we often feel the need to come up with fancy names for the things we do. Regardless of what this is called, it’s useful when you want to understand something well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Why It’s Used</th>
<th>Questions &amp; Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On...</td>
<td>Beginning of a sentence.</td>
<td>Sometimes I see really big capital letters, way taller than regular size, at the start of a story. What’s that about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Name of a month.</td>
<td>What if there’s another Delaware River? Is that still one-of-a-kind?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware River</td>
<td>Something that is one-of-a-kind. This is a specific river.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Washington</td>
<td>A person’s name.</td>
<td>Sometimes I see titles not capitalized. I don’t understand how this works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>A person’s title.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Ox”</td>
<td>This is a nickname, but I guess it’s still a name.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redcoats</td>
<td>This is the name of a group of people.</td>
<td>If the writer had called them “soldiers” it wouldn’t be capitalized. This must mean that “Redcoats” refers to a specific group of soldiers that is a one-of-a-kind group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To see how it works, look at this well-structured sentence:

On a bitter January morning, Malcolm Maxwell, a young man of meager means but grand ambitions, left the quiet country town in which he’d been raised, and set off on the bold errand he’d been preparing for all his life.

Here’s what it looks like when we break it into parts.

* Main Part. Describes the MAIN action in the sentence: “Malcolm Maxwell… left the quiet country town in which he’d been raised…”

* Intro Part. Introduces the MAIN part: “On a bitter January morning…”

* In-Between Part. Splits the MAIN part; feels like an interruption: “…a young man of meager means but grand ambitions…”

* Add-On Part. Provides additional information about the MAIN part: “…and set off on the bold errand he’d been preparing for all his life.”

Once we’ve labeled the parts, we describe the structure like this:

INTRO + MAIN + IN-BETWEEN + MAIN + ADD-ON

Here are the parts in order:

* INTRO: “On a bitter January morning,”

* MAIN: “Malcolm Maxwell,”

* IN-BETWEEN: “a young man of meager means but grand ambitions,”

* MAIN: “left the quiet country town in which he’d been raised,”

* ADD-ON: “and set off on the bold errand he’d been preparing for all his life.”

Understanding sentence structure helps you:

1. **Find problems.** We all have problems with our sentences, but the real problem is when our readers find them before we do—especially when those readers are our teachers. When you have a way of analyzing sentences, however, even if teachers mark you down, you can ask them to explain the problems they see in terms you understand.

2. **Fix problems.** Finding problems is good; fixing problems is better. When you think you’re having a problem, start by isolating the MAIN part of the sentence and writing that out separately. Then add other parts around it as needed. Don’t put them in unless you really need them. Sometimes you can leave parts out or move them into sentences of their own. Regardless of what’s wrong, finding the MAIN part of a sentence and working to make the rest of the sentence simpler is the best way to fix it.

3. **Improve beginnings, lengths, and structures.** Variety is the key to creating groups of sentences readers enjoy. Knowing how to analyze and manipulate the parts of sentences is the key to creating variety.

4. **Clarify of your ideas.** Each of the four sentence parts matches a type of information you convey in your sentences. You present your ideas more clearly when you know how each part contributes to what you want your readers to understand.

5. **Express your voice.** Previously, I said that Voice = Word Choice + Sentence Structure. Understanding how to use the four sentence parts gives you more control over the fluency, or flow, of your sentences. Once you know how to do this, you can project your voice more confidently in your writing through both word choice and sentence structure.

6. **Use the best structures from the writing you like most.** For me, the biggest advantage of learning how to analyze sentences is being able to write sentences similar to those of the great writers I read. As you’ll discover in the next few pages, the approach you just learned for analyzing sentences will help you write sentences you might not be able to write otherwise.
Learn From the Best

Your best writing teachers are the writers you read. This is true for any aspect of writing, but it’s especially true for sentences because sentence writing is one of the hardest things to teach and to learn.

What if you could produce sentences with the same solid structures as the best sentences you read? In this section, this is what you’ll learn to do.

Start by taking another look at our first example sentence, but in a slightly different format that makes both the structure and the content easy to see at the same time:

On a bitter January morning, Malcolm Maxwell, a young man of meager means but grand ambitions, left the quiet country town in which he’d been raised, and set off on the bold errand he’d been preparing for all his life.

No matter how long and complicated this sentence is, you can create your own sentences just like it by following the pattern of parts it contains. The pattern for this sentence is:

INTRO + MAIN + IN-BETWEEN + MAIN + ADD-ON

In the next three sections, I’ll show you a set of patterns that I know you’ll find very useful. There are ten patterns in this collection, but you can write almost anything you need to write if you master just the first six. Think about this for a moment: Your entire sentence writing life can be wrapped up neat and tidy with just six sentence patterns. And none of them takes much time to learn.

Here’s a sentence with the same structural patterns that uses different content:

The day after my birthday, my best friend, someone I had known almost all my life, lied to me about why she didn’t come to my party, and I’ve never been able to forgive her for that.

Here’s another one:

On August 12, 1945, Harry Truman, a modest man of accidental aspirations, was summoned to the White House, and informed that he was now one of the most powerful people on Earth.

You can see that these sentences share the same structure. Can you hear that structure, too? This is what matters most: reading different sentences that share the same pattern—and hearing the pattern! Hearing sentence patterns is the key to sentence sense.

Gradually, you’ll begin to recognize the parts as you read them, just like you recognize parts in a song. Soon, you won’t need the patterns; great sentences will be part of the way you write.