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2

Sentence Slots

A sentence follows a formula. We'll call the formula a *sentence pattern*. Linguists distinguish among eight or more sentence patterns. In the interest of simplicity, we're collapsing these into the three most basic, general patterns. We'll be talking only about declarative sentences.

Every sentence is required to have a subject slot. A noun plus its modifiers, or a pronoun, goes into the subject slot. The subject slot tells who or what the sentence is about. Every sentence is also required to have a verb slot. The verb determines whether or not any other slots are required and what those other slots will be called. The verb is the boss. The sentence patterns dance to the tune of the verb.

Many people find that sentence diagrams help to clarify sentence structure. Sentence diagramming gets many people excited, many upset and many just curious because they never learned it. They wonder what it's all about. We're going to keep it simple, and we hope it serves its intended purpose, which is clarification.

We can teach the essentials of grammar – the skeletal structure of a sentence – by using the visual of the slots.

Pattern 1: Subject + (action) Verb

The simplest kind of a sentence is a two-word sentence such as these: Dogs bark. Time flies. Telephones ring. It rained. The diagram for these is shown in Figure 2.1 on page 14.

We'll call this Pattern 1. This pattern has two required slots: the subject and the verb. Nothing else is required to make a Pattern 1 sentence complete. We could add all kinds of modifiers to put flesh on the bones, but we're concentrating in this chapter only on the skeletal structure of the three sentence patterns.

Figure 2.1 Pattern 1: Two Slots

If you want to introduce the term *intransitive verb* to name the kind of verb that requires no further words (or slots) to complete it, you can certainly do so. Technically, an intransitive verb is a verb that does not require a direct object. You can define an intransitive verb as a verb that a writer can put a full stop after.

Teaching Procedure: Observe and Report

Start by simple observation. Show students the diagram, with no words in it, and ask them to describe what they see. You want them to notice that the diagram consists of a horizontal line bisected by a vertical line. Then, show how a sentence is actually diagrammed: The subject fits into the subject slot; the verb, into the verb slot. Use these terms as you demonstrate. Point out that the subject and the verb go above the horizontal line. Point out also that the first word of the sentence is to be capitalised on the diagram, as it is in the sentence; the diagram also includes the full stop at the end of the sentence.

Grammar-Maths
Connection: Sentence
diagramming uses
the language and
visuals of mathematics.
This connection can
strengthen students'
understanding of both
subjects.

This procedure will seem extraordinarily easy, so easy that you and the students may wonder why you are bothering to do it. But by going so slowly, you're actually teaching students a powerful paradigm about grammar, so don't worry if it seems too easy right now. The ease of the task is counterbalanced by the newness of some of the terminology that you will introduce as you go.

If your students are ready, you can include helping verbs in the diagram. (You may remember from your diagramming days that the helping verb fits right on the line with the main verb).

Through the sentence diagrams you may be able to introduce the term and concept of subject-verb agreement. If you ask students to turn the plural *dogs* into the singular *a dog*, they will see immediately that the verb has to change. (At this point, don't worry about diagramming modifiers, which would be

diagrammed on diagonal lines below the words they modify.) You won't expect them to say, "Hey, wait a minute. You can't make a plural noun singular and expect the verb not to react! We have to create subject-verb agreement between a singular or plural subject and its verb form!" But you can expect them to *notice* that same phenomenon and try to put it into words, and *then* you can help them name the concept.

The best way to teach helping verbs is simply by listing them as members of a club. The two "co-presidents" of this club are *have* and *be*. Other members (called modal auxiliaries) are *would*, *should*, *could*, *will*, *shall*, *may*, *might*, *must*.

Teaching Procedure: Feel the Patterns

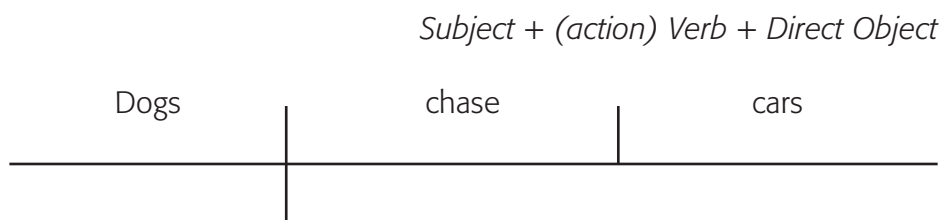
Use "wordstorming" to have students feel each of the patterns, beginning with this one. Propose a topic. Have students generate as many two-word sentences as they can within a given amount of time. This activity melds a grammar lesson with a vocabulary lesson, both of which can emanate from a reading experience and then feed right into a writing task. What you'll end up with, as a class, is a cache of nouns and verbs that are relevant to the given topic and that serve to reinforce a grammatical pattern.

Pattern 2: Subject + (action) Verb + Direct Object

A Pattern 2 sentence, as shown in Figure 2.2, is bossed around by a verb that requires a direct object. Such verbs are called transitive verbs. You may or may not want to introduce the term *transitive verb*. If you do, make the connection to related words: *transit*, *transportation*, *transition*, *transcontinental*.

Again, spend some time on observation. Students should notice that the difference between Patterns 1 and 2 is that Pattern 2 has three slots and that the third slot has a vertical line that does *not* cut through the horizontal line. This is because the bisecting line is a firewall between the subject and the predicate, while the direct object occupies a slot that belongs to the predicate. The verb announces the relationship between the subject and the object.

Figure 2.2 Pattern 2: Three Slots



Teaching Procedure: Understand Direct Objects

The purpose of this activity is to have students understand the relationship between subject and direct object and how that relationship is announced by the verb.

Give one student a sign that says “Jamie” and another a sign that says “the ball”. Have “Jamie” and “the ball” stand next to each other, leaving space for another student to walk through. Give several other students signs that have action verbs on them. The verbs may be in any tense. Then, invite the “verbs” to walk through “Jamie” and “the ball”, thus demonstrating exactly how the Pattern 2 sentence works: There’s a relationship between the subject and the direct object, and it is the verb that announces that relationship.

Teaching Procedure: Feel the Pattern

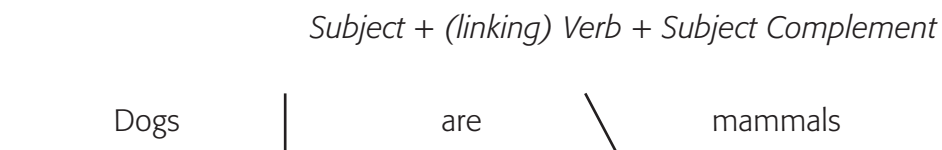
Apply the teaching procedures that you used with Pattern 1 to Pattern 2.

Pattern 3: Subject + (linking) Verb + Subject Complement

Pattern 3 sentences, as shown in Figure 2.3, use a linking verb. Students will notice that the only difference between the Pattern 2 and the Pattern 3 diagram is that the line in the Pattern 3 predicate slants to the left. Why might this be?

As you’ve done for the first two patterns, fill in the diagram with several examples. For Pattern 3, the subject complements can be nouns (called, if you wish to introduce the term, *predicate nouns* or *predicate nominatives*). The subject complements can be adjectives (called, if you wish to introduce the term, *predicate adjectives*). And the subject complements can be adverbs of time or place or prepositional phrases filling the subject complement slot. If you want to keep the lesson simple at this point, you can use the term *subject completer* for the third slot of the Pattern 3 sentence.

Figure 2.3 Pattern 3: Three Slots



You can explain it this way: “We can see that, for Pattern 3, we do need this third slot. We can’t end the sentence with a linking verb. You have to *be*, *seem* or *become* something or someone. If I say, ‘The music sounds...,’ don’t you expect me to tell you something about the music? If I say, ‘Ice cream tastes...,’ you expect me to tell you something about how the ice cream tastes, don’t you?” You’re driving at the point that a linking verb calls for a completer, but that completer is not the same as the direct object. Whereas the direct object receives the action of the verb (as students saw in the above demonstrations), the completer simply tells about the subject. Subject complements *comment* on the subject. Hence, the slanted line that points back to the subject. Point out to students the relationship between the words *completer* and *complement*.

You may wonder why it is important that students be able to distinguish between a direct object and a subject complement. There are two reasons. The first is that there’s a mental skill involved in determining the difference between that which receives action (direct object) and that which comments upon something (subject complement). The second reason for knowing the difference between a direct object and a subject complement has to do with usage. Students will learn to use adverbs to modify action verbs, adjectives to complete linking verbs:

Students and teachers should **act respectfully**.

Students and teachers should **be respectful**.

Another important difference between the action verb and the linking verb sentences is that the linking verb sentences “are called ‘Categorical Propositions’ (CPs) by logicians and rhetoricians. The CP makes an assertion – it states a proposition – about a particular subject” (Kolln, 2007, 22). The Pattern 3 sentence invites – or dares – proof. If I say “Queensland is the most beautiful state in Australia,” I can’t prove that with facts, but I can explain my opinion. I can say more. But if I say, “Bananas grow in Queensland,” that *is* a fact. As a fact, it is not inviting me to say more.

The application of this condition is that Pattern 3 sentences, because they invite further discussion, tend to be good choices for topic sentences. If students realise this, they can compose topic sentences that will drive them forward. Action verb sentences, though they are perfect for moving the paragraph along, can get student writers stuck in the mud if used as topic sentences. The same principle could be applied to the closing sentences of paragraphs: The developmental sentences use action verbs to lead to the conclusion, which expresses itself as a linking verb sentence.

Take Your Time: Assess for Understanding, Not Memorisation

We believe that one of the biggest impediments to successful grammar instruction – aside from the use of fill-in-the-blank worksheets – is that teachers jump ahead too quickly. Avoid the temptation to confuse a student’s ability to recite a definition and pick out examples from controlled text (in grammar exercise books) with true understanding.

True understanding of the sentence patterns reveals itself in the students’ ability to construct, and then embellish and manipulate, sentences in the three patterns. Here are a few authentic assessments for the sentence patterns:

1. Write a poem consisting of sentences of a single pattern.
2. Write an advertisement consisting of sentences of a single pattern.
3. Write a description or narrative that alternates among the three patterns.

Conclusion

The system of sentence patterns and the slots in them provides an accessible format. Through this format, a tremendous amount of information can be stored, retrieved and built upon. Real sentences have all kinds of embellishments, compounds, inversions, elisions and branches. But at the core of every sentence, you can find one or more of these three patterns.

Of course, we expand our sentences with modifiers and compounds. It is not within the scope of this book, however, to demonstrate the complete range of sentence diagrams. All we’ve sought to do is to give you the most basic of frameworks, a starter kit. If and when you teach the sentence patterns, don’t be afraid to take your time. Foundational understandings are critical, and the visuals and acting-outs will lead to durable learning if you don’t jump ahead too quickly.

Now that you and your students know about sentence patterns, you have a place to hang everything about grammar in your mental wardrobe. Knowing about the sentence patterns is not an end in itself: It is a means of facilitating further understanding of more complicated sentences. In the next chapter, you’ll learn how to teach your students to expand and manipulate elements within the sentence.