

Minnesota Writing Project: Demonstration Lesson

Developing Editing & Style Through Sentence Combining

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Grade level: Used with 11th-12th but easily applicable at multiple levels.

Approximate length: Varies with teacher intent: Can easily fill any class hour or hours but can also work effectively as mini-lessons over a period of days.

Objectives: As a result of working with sentence combining, students will . . .

- demonstrate increased awareness of and ability to edit their sentence errors;
- demonstrate a wider range of writing style strategies thereby increasing their sentence
 - variety and length.

Rationale: I teach a College Writing Lab class to predominantly average ability junior/senior students who are planning to attend college. The class is designed to expose students to writing genres they may encounter in college as well as improve and develop their present writing skills. I was first exposed to William Strong's sentence combining ideas last summer at the open institute. After incorporating them at an experimental level during a few CWL class periods, I have decided to develop the role of sentence combining for this upcoming year. I found sentence combining to be an effective and engaging tool for students to explore and examine their own writing, challenging them to stretch beyond repetitive (safe) structures and to learn what works and doesn't work both mechanically and stylistically.

Lesson Context: Because students are combining the sentences, they inadvertently create the lesson(s), meaning I may find myself teaching about comma usage, run-ons, fragments, semicolons and/or stylistic touches such as participle and absolute phrases or appositives. It really depends on what they create and what their needs are. However, and perhaps even within a sentence combining session, I think it is important to define (maybe it's redefining) the basics: independent clauses (IC), dependent clauses (DC), and phrases (Ph). These may assume even more elementary basics: noun, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions.

Lesson: Formal academic example = "Pumped Up;" Creative Example: "Street Scene"

Note how each is simply made up of short independent clauses; therefore, it's pretty easy to create these yourself.

Students are to combine the sentence sets honoring the content. It is acceptable to occasionally combine them into 2 sentences, but this should only be used sparingly.

Presentation Options: Students can do this individually in their class journal if you wish. I've

walked around the room and have scribbled down students' names & combining number for them to place their examples on the board. They do not know the reason for request, either error example or style example. This approach may depend upon "community safety" level. With some classes, I've put up errors I've noticed. We then discuss their combinations. I've enjoyed the interactive classrooms that have resulted.

- It also works well to take advantage of writing groups, either having them combine individually and select ones they wish to present to class or they can just work as a group to combine. This can be effective in building writer's group community.
- Borrowing from Jessica Breed's lesson, it may be a great idea to focus on one particular skill or style each time you do sentence combining.
- What I do think is essential is that students only do a few of the sentence combining problems at a time with class/group interaction dispersed. This gives them a chance to improve right within the context of the lesson because after they have noted their errors or recognized a new sentence structure, they get a chance to incorporate improvements right within the lesson time (immediate feedback).

Assessment: During one semester, CWL students are writing 4 essays that include a drafting process: Recommendation or Problem/Solution Essay, Personal Narrative, Literary Analysis, and Persuasive Research Essay. Frequent editing errors and weak sentence variety have the power to drop them one grade from content grade (A to B or B to C, etc.), so more often than not, students are quite attentive to opportunities to improve editing and stretch style. Also, one of a two part final exam is editing. From my infrequent experimentations with sentence combining, I've witnessed students apply self-editing on essays, and my final editing exams were at their highest since I took over the class 4 years ago.

Highly Recommended Texts:

Coaching Writing: The Power of Guided Practice by William Strong.

Key Quotes: "Just as weight training developed flexibility & strength, practice with sentence combining could strengthen their language muscles." "Making mistakes was okay, I emphasized; in fact, usage errors would give us something to talk about and learn from, thereby, speeding up their learning." The point of sentence combining [. . .] was to make good sentences, not long ones" (16).

Sentence Combining: A Composing Book (3rd Ed.) by William Strong.

The goal is to "train an automatic pilot for sentence construction" so your mind will be free "to think about the important issues of writing - context, organization, and audience" (16). Text overview: "Warm-Up Combining," "Intermediate Combining, Advanced Combining," "Unclustered Combining," "Recombining Practice;" also includes "Writing Tips and Writing Invitations."