



**Seven Sentence
Building Activities
to Develop
Advanced Writers**



Grades 2–10

**by
Jerry Morris
Collins Education Associates LLC**

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Acknowledgements

I have conducted hundreds of writing workshops across the country for the Collins Writing Program. At the beginning of each workshop, I hold above my head a tattered little book, bound with clear tape, and embraced with a rubber band. "This is the best book on writing you will ever read. It's *The Elements of Style* written by William Strunk, Jr., a professor at Cornell, and his famous student, E.B. White. As you can see, I've had it for awhile."

Often times when I'm flying back to Boston, I tug my old friend from my bag and read some of my favorite passages. This book inspired my teaching during my decades in the classroom, and it is the inspiration for this book.

If you are curious enough and patient enough to read my book, you will see how I took the advice of my heroes of the written word and brought that advice to young students.

Purchase a copy of *The Elements of Style*. Far better writers than I have sung its praises — from Hemingway to Steven King. This is the bible of the written word for a host of other scribblers as well as me. Over ten million copies have been sold, so copies await you on shelves in your neighborhood. You can purchase a used copy online for less than the price of a cup of café latte.

About the Cover

The young writer needs to understand the **structures** available to get thoughts on paper and to learn and use the **conventions** of the English language within these structures. To breathe life into writing, the novice begins to unravel the mysteries of **style** by tinkering with words, phrases, clauses, and figures of speech. Eventually, the writer's words will leave a distinct sound on the page. This sound is the writer's **voice**.

~ Jerry Morris

Foreword

In *Seven Sentence Building Activities to Develop Advanced Writers*, Jerry Morris presents techniques he developed over three decades to solve one of the most common and irksome problems facing teachers: how to help basic writers become more proficient. Helping students apply basic capitalization and punctuation rules is easy compared to getting them to use specific language, figures of speech, and complex sentences — some of the techniques that make basic writing more advanced. Throughout his career, Jerry has taken on this worthy challenge, and this book distills his experiences into seven sentence building activities that can be used from the second grade on up.

We know Jerry's techniques are successful because of high scores schools in his district achieved on the notoriously difficult Massachusetts writing tests (MCAS.) How did he do it? He used guidelines from his favorite book on writing — William Strunk and E. B. White's *The Elements of Style*, originally written for students at Cornell University — and adapted them for younger students.

Jerry, like Strunk and White, focuses on the sentence. He provides students with opportunities to create original compound and complex sentences that include similes, metaphors, parallel construction, appositives, multiple subjects and predicates, and personification. Students are successful because they have plenty of opportunities to practice and build skills step-by-step. This is not a fill-in-the-blank workbook, but a structure to help teachers and students discover the joys of crafting advanced sentences.

To make his approach more powerful, he has added two of my favorite techniques: oral reading and focus correcting. Oral reading, having students read their papers to themselves out loud, is a powerful but under-used technique that helps students develop a “writer's ear.” Focus correcting will make the job of assessing student writing easier because, as the name suggests, it focuses on a few aspects of the writing. Jerry's approach, based on seven activities, will instruct your students in the “elements of style” while not producing an overwhelming burden of papers to grade.

Jerry provides a six- to eight-week process for the beginning of the year to introduce students to the seven sentence building techniques. These techniques can then be used throughout the year to reinforce the skills taught during the beginning of the year. For teachers using the Collins Writing Program, it is the perfect way to start teaching the qualities of style, the most difficult writing quality to teach.

Try this approach. The students will have fun while learning how to write graceful, rich sentences.

John J. Collins, Ed.D.
CEO, Collins Education Associates LLC

Introduction

What is the best way to help writers improve their skills? This book will answer the question by presenting a six- to eight-week program based on William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White's *The Elements of Style*. It is best used in conjunction with the Collins Writing Program at the beginning of the school year.

My Story

Throughout my 34 years in the classroom, I was determined to teach my students to write well. Summaries, reports, descriptive pieces, and essays kept me correcting early and late in the day. On a typical two-page report, spelling errors, sentences that made no sense, sentences that were run together, sentences that would make grammar specialists wince in pain, and sentences with the simplest and most basic errors would make me feel like Sisyphus, a sinner from Greek mythology who was forced to push a rock up a hill only to have it roll back on him again and again. The most common errors were explained to the class. Sit-downs with students would allow me to shove many rocks up the slope. The students and I made progress, but our onward march upward was slow and exhausting.

During those early years of teaching, I was a basketball coach. Half of a typical practice was spent on individual fundamentals, and the other half was used to incorporate the fundamentals in a game situation or scrimmage. It dawned on me that I was teaching writing by scrimmaging. I was skipping the first half of practice. Could a student remember and learn ten or more writing concepts pointed out in an individual sit-down? Would it make sense to teach basketball by having players only partake in full court games and blow the whistle to stop action to correct mistakes? I had to find a way to teach the fundamentals of writing the same way I taught the fundamentals of basketball by breaking the game of writing down into teachable segments. After learning the fundamentals in a step-by-step fashion, students would have a better chance of playing the full court game of writing longer pieces.

I searched for a sequential program that would correct foundational issues. If these fundamentals were taught before longer pieces were assigned, it would be slow in the beginning but worth it in the long run. Like a man looking for a first-rate suit, who couldn't describe what the suit would look like but who would know it when he saw it, I went to many shops and looked at many ensembles that made me grimace. In the end, I found the suit, but it didn't fit. I pulled Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* off the rack and read and reread it, but it needed to be tailored to fit the needs of my students. It was time to stop hunting. This book deals with the problems I faced. Much of it contains brief but clear explanations of the right and wrong way to construct a sentence. The authors zero in on the most important rules for good writing and offer the best advice on style you will find anywhere, but it didn't fit because it was written for college students. My goal was to take what Strunk and White had to say and transform it into a language and form my students could understand and practice.

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The Elements of Style brought many issues home for me. Here are two: One, the authors didn't talk about how to write a report, an essay, or a research paper. They spent their time on the right and wrong of sentence writing by looking at different types of sentences, not in longer pieces but one at a time. Two, the book was originally written by William Strunk, Jr. for his students at Cornell, an Ivy League School. If he wrote a book about many common mistakes seen in sentences, he must have been seeing them from his elite students. To this day, the book is given to college freshmen across the land. College professors must be seeing many of the same mistakes Will Strunk saw, similar to those I was seeing among my school kids.

The run-on sentence drove me to distraction. I reasoned that teaching the difference between a complete sentence and a run-on before having students write longer pieces would be a good thing. It might keep my hair brown. Teaching the difference between a fragment and a complete sentence might keep me from having nervous twitches. Teaching some structures such as simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences would allow students to get their thoughts on paper better and allow them to vary the types of sentences they wrote. Teaching them the figures of speech one at a time would give their writing more punch. I might drink less coffee. Teaching them some basic rules of writing taught to me by my heroes, Strunk and White, and translating those rules to young writers would set them on the right course. But most importantly, getting them excited about their writing, proud of the words they put on the page, and confident that they could be good and maybe great at writing could push the rock over the top of the hill. Sisyphus, your sins are forgiven!

Starting in my fifth year of teaching and continuing until my thirty-fourth year, I worked to develop a program that would address those issues. It was the best work I ever did. The results were dramatic. Each year, it took time to clear the precarious writing path of the boulders of run-ons, the potholes of fragments, the thorns of broken rules, and the low branches of poorly constructed sentences that whipped me in the face. Progress was slow in the beginning. But when the students and I made our way down the path for a succeeding journey, we had a much better jaunt.

In answer to my initial question — what is the best way to help writers improve their skills — teach a few concepts at a time by building one sentence at a time (again and again). The skills build from one week to the next. You will teach more effectively and have happier, more skilled, and more confident writers. By the time your students are finished with the first eight weeks of school, they will have learned the structure of many types of sentences, figures of speech, rules of good writing from Strunk and White, and the habits of mind a good writer possesses. Like me you will be saying, “This is the best thing I've ever done with my students!”

How to Use This Book

Begin by reading A Scripted Lesson on page 13. This section describes how the process looks and sounds in the classroom. Every teacher's script will be unique, but this gives you a starting point.

At the start of each week, you need to make enough double-sided copies of the template for the activity with the blank quiz (page 17) on the back. Although you do not need to do a great deal of preparation for this program, every student needs a double-sided copy for each sentence that they will write.

Next, review the title page for the activity to see what is covered. Show students the examples from some great authors as well as the sample sentences from the activity. Before teaching the activity to the class, read the two pages of directions and advice from Strunk and White. This will tell you what is covered and provide the focus of the activity.

Following the directions and suggestions from the scripted lesson, lead students through building the sentence. Have them read what they wrote out loud in a one-foot voice several times during the process. Follow this reading with a teacher-led edit where students check to make sure they have done what the FCAs required. End with the quiz on the back.

To demonstrate editing, you could use the student samples provided in this book. Using a document projector or transparency, project the samples and have students suggest corrections or improvements. You could also take samples from the class, having students correct them before they edit their own papers. Avoid doing individual sit-downs with students. Instead, make them the editors.

Write a sentence every day in class for a week. Assign one to three sentences for homework each night. By the end of the week, students will have written at least ten sentences for the activity and should have concepts mastered. If they have not, stay on the same activity for several more days until the concepts are learned.

At the end of most weeks, it is time to move on to the next activity. With the exception of Activity One, the activities have several templates ranging from basic to intermediate to advanced. In the lower grades, teachers will use the basic and/or intermediate templates, and the process could take more than six to eight weeks to complete if more practice is necessary. In the upper grades, teachers will use the intermediate and/or advanced templates.

FCA: _____ NAME: _____

FCA: _____ DATE: _____

FCA: _____

_____ subject predicate
(sentence base)

article adjective adjective noun (subject)

verb (predicate) simile how, when, where

FINAL SENTENCE:

What Does the Sentence Building Look Like in the Classroom?

A Scripted Lesson

Let me begin with a disclaimer. No lesson ever goes according to plan, and this is a good thing. The script below is written to give you an idea of how a lesson might evolve. Remember, as a teacher, you are an artist, not a scientist. Be yourself. Show your artistry. Adjust the script.

Materials: Each student has the template on the preceding page. The template has a back side for a quiz. The teacher needs something to write on at the front of the room: a board, overhead, flip chart, smart board, etc.

Brief introduction by the teacher, *Rather than give long pieces of writing at the beginning of the year, we are going to work on a few important aspects of writing by building one sentence at a time. If we learn a few principles and skills and practice those until we know them and then move on to a few different principles and skills and practice by building one sentence at a time, we will learn a great deal about writing. This practice makes longer pieces much easier to complete because we will have learned what to do in many types of sentences. Does that make sense? I might make this longer. Most kids know E.B. White from his children's stories. The fact that he is coauthor of the source of our content brings strength to the argument. I would bring his name into the introduction. Also, I would mention Will Strunk and his work at Cornell helping Ivy League students improve their writing by focusing on the sentence. I would talk about the problems my former students have had in writing and how this program helped them. In one to three minutes, share your experiences with writing, your reasoning for this important work, and show your enthusiasm for writing and sentence building.*

On the front board, have the same information that is on the template.

Teacher, *When we build our sentence, we are going to work on three aspects of writing. Pick up your pencil. Look at the top left of your template. You will see the letters FCA three times. FCA stands for Focus Correction Area. These are short rubrics used in connection with the Collins Writing Program. It means this is what we are learning — this is what is going to be corrected on this paper. Our first FCA is specific language. (In lower grades I use the word **exact** and explain it.) Write Specific language beside the first FCA. (Do the same on the board.) Go to the next FCA. Write One simile. (Do the same on the board.) Go to the last FCA. Write Cap/Period. (Do the same on the board.)*

Here is a brief explanation of the first FCA, specific language. William Strunk and E.B. White tell us, "Use definite, specific, concrete language" (p. 15). This is our first rule of writing. Use exact words, not fuzzy or vague words. Use German shepherd, not dog. Use darted, not ran. Use maroon, not red. Get the idea?

Pick up your pencil. At the middle of your paper near the top it says sentence base and subject predicate. Put your finger on it. Write this sentence base. The car crashed. Car is the noun-subject. Remember noun — person, place, or thing. Crashed is the verb — predicate. It shows action. How many of you remember noun and verb?

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First thing we are going to do is find a specific word for car. Can anyone give me a particular kind of car? (From the lowest grades, kids know cars, but they may not be that specific.)

Student, *Ford.*

Teacher, *Can you give me a particular model?*

Students, *Mustang GT. Hummer H2. Cadillac Escalade. Volkswagen Beetle. Corvette. Ferrari Testarosa. Infinite G35. Lamborghini. Mercedes SL 500.*

(If I have another adult in the classroom, I will ask her to jot these specific models on the board.)

Teacher, *Okay, put your finger on the first line where it says noun-subject. Pick up your pencil.*

Write down your favorite car on the line. I'm going to put mine on the board.

(I want every kid to write. In most classes, I will have two to five kids who don't write the name of a car on the template.)

Teacher, *Anyone who did not write on the line, pick up your pencil and listen and get the name of a car from your classmates. Give me the names of cars you wrote.*

Student, *Cadillac CTS.*

Teacher, *Very specific car. Great.*

(I do this for about five cars and tell the reluctant students to get the name of a car on the line.)

Teacher, *Next, we are going to pick a color, not red, white, or blue. I want a specific color. Can you give me a specific color?*

Students, *Forest green. Sky blue. Midnight black. British racing green. Diamond white.*

Wedding cake white. Cherry red. Magenta. Aqua.

(After each of these, I say — great, very specific — much better than green or blue or black or red.)

Teacher, *Pick up your pencil. Put your finger where you have an adjective right before the noun-subject. The adjective we are going to write here is the color of our car. Write down a specific adjective to describe your car. I'm going to put mine on the board.*

(Again, I may have three to five who write nothing. But they will soon realize they are not going to slip by and write nothing. So I will again tell those who wrote nothing to pick up their pencils and listen as I have classmates read their adjectives and tell the reluctant students to write one down that they hear.)

Teacher, *Go back to the first adjective. This could be a shape. For example, a Hummer H2 is boxy. A Corvette or other sports car could be low and sleek. However, the year of the car may determine the shape. Different years of cars have different shapes. The year might be the best adjective. For example, Corvettes from 1963–1967 had similar shapes, but the 1968 model changed dramatically. Pick up your pencil. Write down the shape or year of your car. I'm going to put mine on the board.*

(Do I need to repeat for the nonwriters?)

Next, go to article at the beginning of the sentence. Does anyone know the three articles?

Student, *A, an, and the.*

Teacher, *Great, a, an, and the are the three articles. (I write them on the board.)*

Teacher, *Select the article that sounds best and write it on the line. Next, does anyone know the best way to check your writing?*

Student, *Read what you write out loud so you can hear it.*

Teacher, *Excellent, take what you have written and read it in a one-foot voice. This means you can hear it from one foot away. I'm going to read mine in a one-foot voice." In a whisper, read . . . The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe . . . Go to it. I should hear you mumbling. See if it sounds good and makes sense.*

Student, *Can I read mine?* (We are only a few words into the sentence, and the kids are realizing that what they have is special.)

Teacher, *I have time to hear three.* (I usually try to get one kid who I know will be great, one kid who never raises his hand, and one of the kids who had a blank but is now feeling good about this writing adventure.)

Student, *The 2003 forest green BMW Z3 . . .*

Teacher, *Excellent. Very specific. I can see it. You are drawing a picture with words.*

Student, *The 2008 midnight black Cadillac Escalade with chrome wheels . . . can I put in with chrome wheels?*

Teacher, *I think you just did. I think it sounds good. It's clear, specific. Great job, leave it in there.*

Teacher, *Next, we go to the verb predicate crashed. Crashed is a specific verb, but let's get something even more specific. It could be a tap, or a rub against another car, or a moderate accident, or a severe collision. What do you have for a more specific word than crashed?*

Students, *Crunched. Traded paint. Bulldozed. Tapped. Touched. Slammed. Battered. Slugged. Bumped. Sideswiped. Thumped. Scratched.*

Teacher, *Put your finger where it says verb-predicate. Write your specific verb on the line. Ready, read what you have in a one-foot voice to see if it sounds good and makes sense. Here, I'll read mine. The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe slammed . . . (At this point, I may need to have verbs repeated for those with blanks. I may also want to hear three or four more from the class.)*

Teacher, *Next, we will add a simile. Similes make comparisons by using like or as. Here are a few similes. He is as quick as a lightning bug. She is as smart as a Jeopardy champ. The runner shot off the blocks like a rocket. The kindergartner walked like a ninety-year-old at a nursing home.*

Take your verb and match your simile with it. Traded paint like what? Slammed like what? Crunched like what?

Students, *Traded paint like two paintings in art class. Slammed like a wrecking ball. Bumped like two strangers on a train. Slugged the Camero like a boxer in the fifteenth round.*

Teacher, *Write your simile on the line. (Some kids won't have a simile, so you will need to have those who do have similes say theirs to give ideas to the other kids.) Now, read what you have in*

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a one-foot voice to see if it sounds good and makes sense . . . I'll read mine. The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe slammed like a wrecking ball . . . Okay, read yours in a one-foot voice.

Teacher, Often times your writing is asking you to tell more. This is called begging an explanation. I'm going to read mine and see if it is asking me to explain more. Then I am going to have you do the same. Ready, here's mine. The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe slammed like a wrecking ball . . . I think it's asking me to tell what it hit. Read yours and see if it is begging you to tell more. If so, write it down. After doing this I would say, Okay, read what you have in a one-foot voice. Does it make sense? Does it sound good? The simile may sound better if you move it to the end of sentence.

Teacher, I'm going to read mine in two ways. Here's what I have now. The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe slammed like a wrecking ball into the guardrail on Route 3 in Marshfield. Let me see how it sounds if I move the simile to the end. The 1967 maroon Corvette coupe slammed into the guardrail on Route 3 in Marshfield like a wrecking ball. What do you think? Which way sounds better? (I might read this several times to them. Then I would ask them to do the same with their sentences. This issue of moving words around will come up again in our sentence building. Strunk and White have sage advice on the matter.)

At the end, I address spelling.

Teacher, Check your sentence. Give me any words you can't spell. I'll spell them for you on the board.

This spelling on the board does a few things. It gives kids a correct visual of the word. It makes them do more editing. It also fixes errors I don't have to deal with when correcting papers, thus making correction faster for me. Most of all, students are spelling words correctly again and again, and they will become better spellers.

When I return papers, I want to make the home link.

Teacher, Your parents would love to see these great sentences. They are refrigerator material. Put them on the fridge. Challenge Mom or Dad to building a sentence. Teach them a lesson. How often do you see your grandparents? Well, read them a couple of your sentences over the phone. If the papers appear to need rewriting, I would have them do the rewriting at the bottom.

A few thoughts on topics for your sentence bases:

First, I would ask students for sentence bases. This does at least two things. It gives them topics that they have selected and find interesting, and, by having them think of sentence bases, it also gets them to understand a sentence is composed of a subject and predicate.

Two, consider making it cross disciplinary. So if you are studying dinosaurs, you could ask for a sentence base on dinosaurs. This would allow them to work in their content knowledge and practice their writing skills.

On page 89, I include a list of sample sentence bases, and on page 90, a list of topics for cross disciplinary sentence building.

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