

Sentence-level instruction: Our viewpoint



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

“We are all of us, of school age and older, in the sentences game. Sentences are our writing commons, the shared ground where every writer walks. A poet works with them, but so does the unsung author who came up with *Items trapped in doors cause delays* or *Store in a cool, dry place*. Every kind of writer writes in sentences.”

- Joe Moran, *First You Write A Sentence*.

In school, writing sentences has become a hot topic, and rightly so. We make many demands on children in their writing lessons (Young & Ferguson [2022a](#)). They must write in different genres and for a variety of purposes and audiences. They must have content for their writing, and know what they want to say. They must be able to write fluently, expressing what they mean clearly and simply, understanding how grammar and syntax make this possible. We would like them to be able to see how words join up and why some sentences work better than others. We would also like them to develop a personal writing style and a writing identity. None of these aims can be met without children having knowledge about sentences and how to write them. Therefore, we at the Writing for Pleasure Centre treat sentence-level instruction with the utmost seriousness.

This viewpoint summarises what we have written about sentence-level instruction in our eBook for teachers (Young & Ferguson [2022b](#)) and in our other blogposts which are listed at the end of this article.

General principles informing our viewpoint

- Central to our position is that, to be effective and meaningful, instruction should take place in the context of what the children are engaged in writing that day ([LINK](#)). The production of sentences must be grounded in real writing. Many other approaches do not make this point.
- Sentences are first conceived at text-level. A sentence is produced in response to a writer’s awareness of audience, purpose, content and genre. We need to ensure that this base is established by generating publishing goals and *reading as writers* (Young & Ferguson [2023a](#)). Children should also create a plan for their composition (Young & Ferguson [2023b](#)) before we begin teaching at the sentence-level. Many approaches do not take account of this.
- In the context of writing lessons, children will benefit from writing about a topic of their own choice within the parameters of a class writing project (see [LINK](#) and Young & Ferguson [2022c](#)). Using one’s own content knowledge is cognitively beneficial; familiar content is stored in long term memory, freeing up children’s limited working memory to concentrate on the task of writing a sentence. Few approaches support

children's agency to choose their own writing topic, thereby missing the opportunity to make writing easier for children. They also miss out on writing with voice and developing a personal style.

- We recognise that a sentence is produced in the context of the other sentences which have preceded and will follow it. This is a further reason why it's a mistake to focus instruction on sentences removed from a real compositional context ([LINK](#)).
- There must be in-built opportunities throughout the writing process for children to play with, revisit, change and adapt their sentences, put them alongside other sentences, and learn to love the feel of different possibilities (Young & Ferguson [2022b](#)).
- We need to fully acknowledge the importance of the reading/writing connection. Children and teachers together read a wide variety of mentor texts and look for the particular sentence *craft moves* an author has made. They discuss the function of these moves in the piece, and quickly learn that they can use them too in their own writing ([LINK](#)). We also encourage teachers and children to record in a personal notebook the great sentences they encounter in their wider reading and would like to use themselves (Young & Ferguson [2020](#)).

Sentence-level instruction

Our instructional advice about writing sentences is always directed towards helping children say what they mean, write with clarity and simplicity, achieve their purpose, develop a personal writing style and identity, and know that they can choose from an array of sentence possibilities. Our model of instruction is grounded in research, and allows teachers to be responsive to the needs of their class at any time (Young & Ferguson [2022b](#)).

Writing sentences in the EYFS & KS1: Bookmaking projects

- Instruction should begin on their first day of school (Young & Ferguson [2023c](#)).
- Instruction helps children gradually develop writing fluency ([LINK](#)).
- Instruction is given through book-making projects, and puts the focus on function and making and sharing meaning. Many other instructional approaches to early sentence-writing insist on the decontextualised learning of skills as a precursor to the composing and transcription of sentences. Research would suggest that this is an instructional mistake (Young & Ferguson [2023d](#); Cabell et al. [2023](#)).

Book-making projects offer the best possible early apprenticeship in the understanding and writing of sentences. They naturally support it. When making a book, children learn that there must be a drawing and some 'writing' on every page. Each drawing elicits a spoken sentence which they can write down, using their own form of writing. Children begin to understand that each sentence represents a complete thought with a beginning and an end, and will come to see that beginnings and endings can be marked by capitalisation and end punctuation. In time they will write both simple and compound sentences, and will progress to writing longer 'chapter books' containing multiple and varied sentences (see Young & Ferguson [2023c](#) and Young & Ferguson [2022b](#) for more details).

Writing sentences in KS1 and KS2

Our viewpoint on sentence-level instruction at Key Stage One and Key Stage Two can be summarised as: **teach, then invite**. Children receive and discuss one item of direct sentence-level instruction, delivered in the form of a mini-lesson. They are then asked to try

out this technique in their own writing that very day. This procedure is in keeping with the principles of SRSD instruction (self regulating strategy development instruction), which research has shown to be one of the most effective teaching strategies a teacher of writing can use.

An individual lesson will include:

- Reference to the success criteria (product goals) agreed on by teacher and children after reading a variety of mentor texts (Young & Ferguson [2023a](#)).
- Naming and discussing one particular sentence-level *craft move* related to the success criteria, explaining its function.
- Showing how and why the writer has used it in one of the mentor texts studied.
- Inviting the class to try out this move in their writing that day.
- Evaluating use of the move during pupil-conferencing (Ferguson & Young [2021](#)).
- Ending the session by sharing how children have used it for themselves ([LINK](#)).

Making and displaying a poster based on the mini-lesson is an invaluable strategy which supports sentence-level instruction (Young & Ferguson [2022b](#)). A poster reminds children that they have added a *craft move* to their writerly knowledge which they can use at any time.

Finally, re-reading is a powerful strategy which must not be underestimated. Children need to read and audit their own sentences. They can re-read them aloud or have a peer read them at any time during the writing process ([LINK](#)).

More articles

- Imaginative writing: Our viewpoint [[LINK](#)]
- Teaching grammar: our viewpoint [[LINK](#)]
- Guidance on teaching at the sentence-level [[LINK](#)]
- Where's the research on teaching at the sentence-level? [[LINK](#)]
- The components of effective sentence-level instruction [[LINK](#)]
- Guidance on what NOT to do when teaching at the sentence-level [[LINK](#)]
- How do we develop writing fluency? [[LINK](#)]