

# No more: They don't know what a sentence is!

## The 'what is a sentence?' book-making project

The aim of this book-making project is to give children a solid apprenticeship in what a sentence is. Young authors can sometimes hold the misconception that it's a capital letter and a full stop that makes a sentence a sentence. This book-making project will help you iron out that misconception.

Through this book-making project, children will learn that:

- A sentence must have a subject and a predicate.
- A subject is the *who* or *what*.
- A predicate explains *what that subject is up to or how it is feeling*.

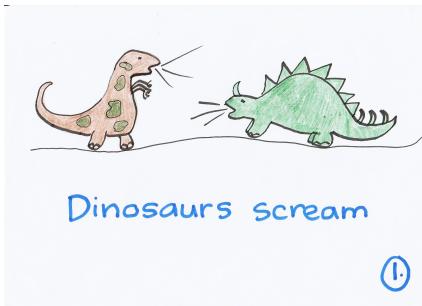
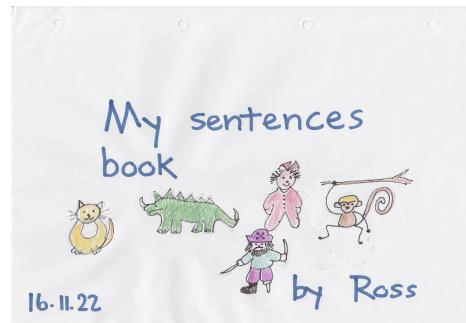
We suggest you start this project by making a 'list book of nouns' - where everyone makes their own book and puts a different thing on each page. Below is an example of a mentor text I made. I shared this with the children on the carpet before inviting them to make one like it during that day's book-making time. At The Writing For Pleasure Centre, we call these types of books 'list books' because these are the kinds of books children are exposed to when they are very young. They can also be called 'board books' or indeed 'baby books'.

A 'list book' is neither a narrative nor a non-fiction text; it simply acts as a list of things represented across multiple pages. For example:



You may notice children will also write adjectives - which *add* more detail to their nouns. For example, *police* in police car and *baby* in baby sister. This is fine.

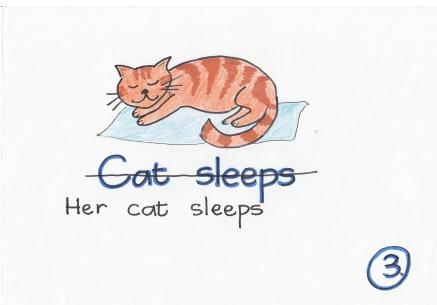
The next day, I showed the class how my mentor book evolved to include verbs. As you can see, my list book is now made up of simple 'kernel sentences'. Kernel sentences are simple 'declarative' sentences which contain only one verb - these are the simplest of all sentences.



Once you've modelled and discussed your book, you can invite children to make their book in the same way. During this book-making time, you may find some children writing phrases similar to 'monkey tired'. At the moment, this isn't a complete sentence because it is missing the *being verb* - 'is'. For example: 'Monkey *is* tired'. However, once you move onto teaching about articles and determiners in the next lesson, this should sort itself out - so don't panic.

In the next session, I showed the children how sentences can also contain *articles* and *determiners*. I recommend bringing out your book from yesterday and asking your class if they found any of your sentences a bit funny sounding. Did they think you were missing some words? See if they can explain *why*. I imagine some will highlight the lack of articles, determiners or 'being' verbs. These are used to give our readers more details about our subject. I suspect some of your children will have already done this in their own books the day before without needing the instruction. This is probably thanks to their early reading experiences at home.

- Articles and determiners give readers more details about the subject in our sentences.





Pirates attack  
Some pirates attack

④



Police car whizzes  
A police car whizzes

⑤



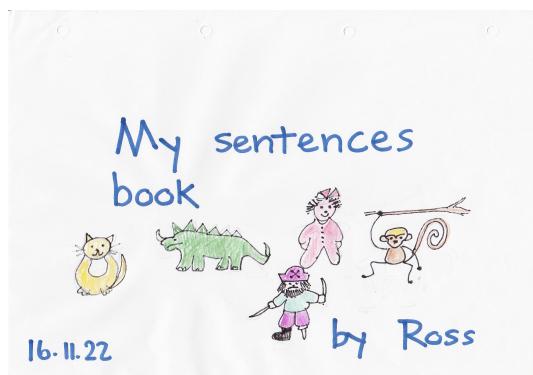
Baby sister sad  
My baby sister was sad

⑥

During this session, children may also notice that they need to insert *being verbs* such as *is*, *are*, *was* or *were*. This is particularly the case when they read their books to their friends towards the end of the writing session. You can invite children to revise their pieces and children should notice that an *is* is required. You can model this by looking at your own mentor text from the previous day, and this can also be reiterated in your pupil-conferencing too.

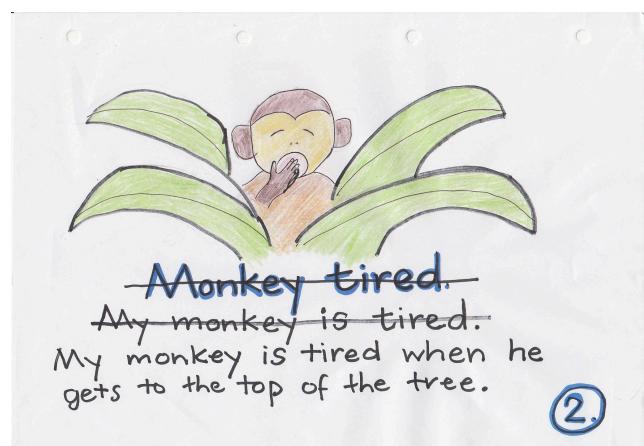
In the next session, children can learn that sentences *may* also contain objects. These let our readers know if anyone or anything else was involved in the sentence.

- An object shares with the reader *who* or *what* was involved.



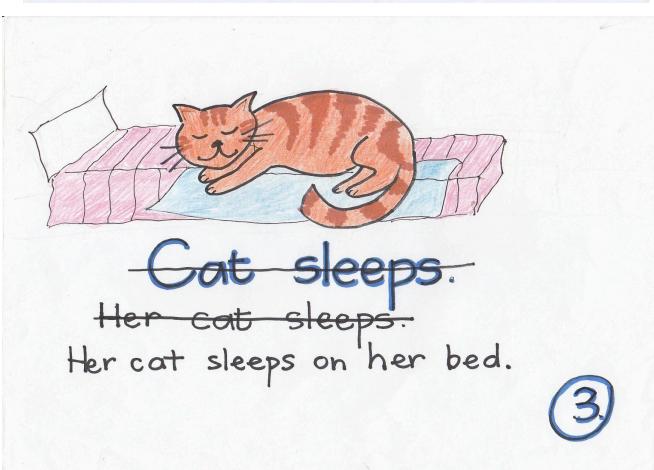
Dinosaurs scream.  
The dinosaurs scream.  
The dinosaurs scream at the caveman.

①



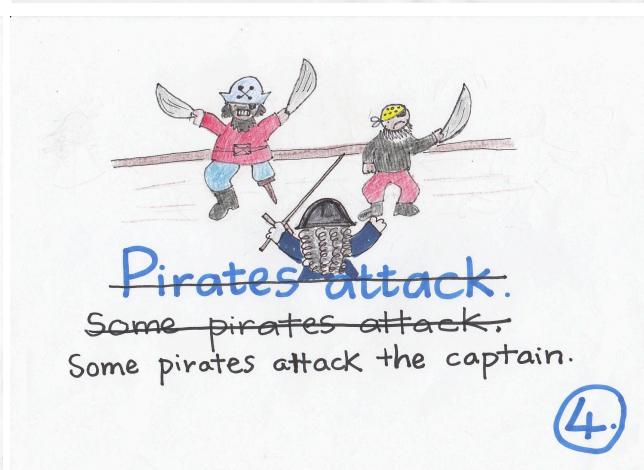
Monkey tired.  
My monkey is tired.  
My monkey is tired when he gets to the top of the tree.

②



Cat sleeps.  
Her cat sleeps.  
Her cat sleeps on her bed.

③



Pirates attack.  
Some pirates attack.  
Some pirates attack the captain.

④



Police car whizzes.

A police car whizzes.

A police car whizzes by my house.

5.



Baby sister sad.

My baby sister was sad.

My baby sister was sad when Mum put her in her cot.

6.

During this stage of the book-making project, you may find some children using adverbs to finish their sentences as opposed to objects. For example:

- The dinosaurs scream loudly.
- My monkey was very tired.
- Her cat sleeps peacefully.

You can highlight how using an adverb is another cool way to write a sentence. Point out how not all sentences need an object in them. If there are examples of this in some of your students' books, you should share these pages with the rest of the class during class sharing time and point out how the *adverb* is adding to the author's verb.

Depending on the experience of the class you're working with, this book-making project can require several sessions. Here is a rough plan which we've found works well. Feel free to adapt it in ways which suit your class' needs and experiences, and, of course, use your own expertise.

Day	Mini-lesson	Book-making time	Class sharing / Author's Chair
1	Show children the 'noun-like book' you've made before telling the children that they are going to go off and make a book like it too.  Show the children how each page has a picture and a word on it. Your book can be between 4-8 pages.	Invite children to begin making their own 4-8 page picture book - ensuring that they have a picture and a noun on each page.  This session sometimes needs to roll over into the next day.	Look out for any interesting <i>craft moves</i> certain children may have used today. Showcase these to the whole class during Author's Chair.
2	Show children the subject-predicate book you've made before telling the children that they are going to go off and make a book like it too.  Show the children how each page has a picture and a sentence (subject-predicate) on it. Your book can be between 4-8 pages.	Invite children to begin making their own 4-8 page picture book - ensuring that they have a picture and a subject-predicate on each page.  This session sometimes needs to roll over into the next day.	Look out for any interesting <i>craft moves</i> certain children may have used today. Showcase these to the whole class during Author's Chair.
3	Show children your book again. This time with your articles/determiners/ <i>being verbs</i> .  Leave a couple of pages to revise live in front of your class. Ask them what the articles and determiners are doing.	Invite children to look at their books and see where they need to insert articles, determiners and <i>being verbs</i> .	Look out for any interesting <i>craft moves</i> certain children may have used today. Showcase these to the whole class during Author's Chair.
4	Show children your book again. This time with objects or adverbs included. Leave a couple of pages to revise live in front of the class. Ask them what the objects or adverbs are doing for your reader.	Invite children to look at their books and see where they might need to include objects or adverbs in their sentences.	Look out for any interesting <i>craft moves</i> certain children may have used today. Showcase these to the whole class during Author's Chair.

## Top tips

- With very young writers (Nursery & Reception), you don't have to do all the mini-lessons. It would be enough to show them how you've made a 'noun list book' or a 'subject-predicate' book and invite them to do the same. Once you feel your class is developmentally ready, you could begin introducing concepts like articles, determiners, *being verbs*, objects and *adverbs*.
- With very young writers (Nursery & Reception), you don't have to use the official terms we've used in our guidance if you don't want to. Conversely, you can if you want to. The focus, though, is on the function of different parts of sentences and not the learning of terms or the labelling the parts. This is something you will want to avoid.
- We recommend that you do this project more than once but don't do it exclusively. The project has the very specific purpose of developing children's understanding of sentences and, for that reason, it's quite a narrow book-making project. You certainly shouldn't use it to replace our other more reader-oriented projects (The Writing For Pleasure Centre [2022](#)). However, what children learn here, they will apply across other book-making projects too.
- The project is effective but it isn't some kind of miracle worker. If you're expecting children to always write with capital letters, full stops, articles, determiners, subject-verb, subject-verb-object and adverbs - you're going to be disappointed. These concepts take time to fully embed and are also influenced by children's writerly experience, oral language development, listening skills and their reading (Young & Ferguson [2022](#)). These sorts of concepts develop incrementally. The point is your children will know more about sentences at the end of this project than they did at the beginning.
- You don't have to but we recommend that you ask the children to work in the same book. They can simply make revisions whenever you introduce a new concept. Some children even like using a different coloured pen or pencil for these revisions. However, some children can find this emotionally challenging. I wouldn't get into an argument about it. Instead, let the child write their book out again each time if that's what they wish to do. Alternatively, you may have some children who will cross out their old sentences and write them out again. Again, this is fine. You also find that some children will be ready to go beyond what's being taught and will write multi-clause sentences using a variety of conjunctions. Let them. This isn't a problem. Finally, you'll get some children who may end up writing multiple sentences on their page. Again, let them.
- What's interesting is once children start adding determiners, objects and adverbs to their sentences, they also begin revising their pictures to reflect this new information. For example: when Ellie's sentence went from 'A cat sleeps' to 'A cat sleeps on my bed', she asked me whether she could draw the bed and the family's shocked faces at finding a cat in their house. You should certainly encourage that. Incidentally, this also works the other way round.
- When you're conferencing with your children in any book-making project, highlighting what their pictures tell you versus what their words tell you is a great way to encourage them to revise their pieces. For example, there is no reason why you can't be thinking to yourself: *'Where is the subject for their sentence in their drawing? Where can I see the verb in the drawing? Where is the object? Where is the reaction to the verb in their illustration (the adverb)?'*