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## Syntax Instruction: The The Bridge Between Reading Fluency and Comprehension

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President, Literacy How, Inc.  
New Jersey Branch IDA Fall Conference  
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**Our Mission is to EMPOWER TEACHERS to ensure that every child learns to read by third grade.**

**Literacy is the language of opportunity.**

Children are at the heart of all we do. We believe that every child has the right to read.

We know that 95% can be taught to read.

We believe that teachers—not programs or products—teach students to read, write and spell.

So we empower teachers with the best ways to teach.

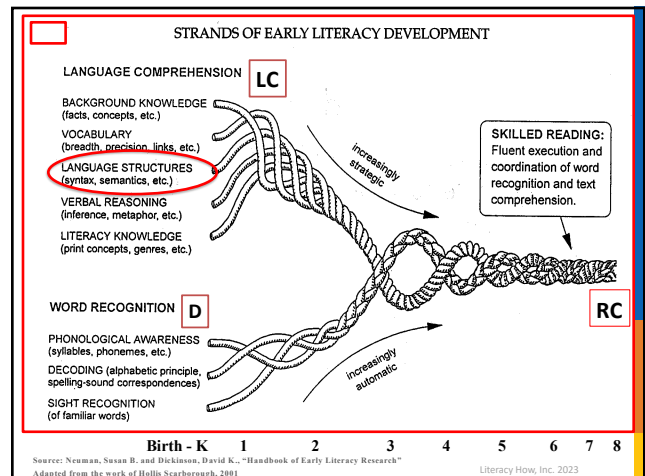
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## My Objectives

1. Share research on the role that syntactic knowledge and awareness play in reading fluency, comprehension, and written expression,
2. Describe a **function-based approach** to syntax, and
3. Explain some activities to support students' ability to comprehend a variety of sentences and compose well-written sentences to convey their thoughts

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### What is Fluency?

Oral reading fluency includes 3 parts.

- Accuracy**  
Reading with few errors.
- Reading Speed**  
The rate at which a student reads.
- Prosody**  
The skill of reading aloud with proper intonation, phrasing, and expression.

**Why should we focus on Fluency?**

Fluency is not an end in itself but a critical gateway to comprehension. Fluent reading frees cognitive resources to process the meaning of what is being read.

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### Syntax is a bridge between word reading fluency and text comprehension

**Word Reading Fluency**  
Accuracy and Automaticity

**Syntax and Grammar**

**Text Comprehension**  
Constructing Meaning  
Vocabulary  
Comprehension

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### The Literacy How Reading Wheel

**ORAL LANGUAGE AT THE CORE**

- Text Comprehension & Written Expression
- Phonemic Awareness
- Phonics (decoding & encoding/spelling)
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Text Comprehension & Written Expression

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### The Ladder of Reading & Writing

**Learning to read seems effortless; some instruction for spelling/writing may be needed (5-10%)**

**Learning to read is relatively easy with broad instruction; some explicit instruction for spelling/writing likely needed (35-40%)**

**Learning to read/spell/write proficiently requires code-based & explicit instruction (40-45%)**

**Learning to read/spell/write requires code-based, explicit, intensive instruction & frequent repetition (10-15%)**

Extended learning or acceleration likely essential

Faster pace & increased implicit learning opportunities likely valuable

A comprehensive analytical approach to learning language structure likely essential

Differentiation: Systematically designed & data-informed

Environmental & within-student factors

Arts, Dean Stanton

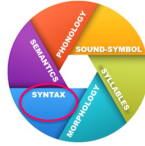
Terms/References at [www.nancyyoung.ca](http://www.nancyyoung.ca)

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## Elements of Structured Literacy



*Structured Literacy* is characterized by the provision of systematic, explicit instruction that integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing and emphasizes the **structure of language** across the speech sound system (**phonology**), the writing system (**orthography**), the structure of sentences (**syntax**), the meaningful parts of words (**morphology**), the relationships among words (**semantics**), and the **organization of spoken and written discourse**.

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## The Role of Syntax in Reading

“Proficient comprehension of text is influenced by adequate syntactic knowledge.”

*Torgesen, 2007, Cain and Oakhill, 2009*

Why is it important to teach syntax?

“Explicit teaching of higher-level components of literacy, such as **syntax or text composition**, may receive little attention.”

IDA Brief

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## Syntactic Knowledge

- the ability to understand and create a variety of grammatical structures within the context of a sentence.
  - supports students’ comprehension of text
- “Children who are exposed to a variety of increasingly sophisticated written sentence constructions have better comprehension and more syntactic knowledge. Correspondingly, children with highly developed syntactic knowledge are better able to comprehend **text that has more complex syntactic constructions.**”

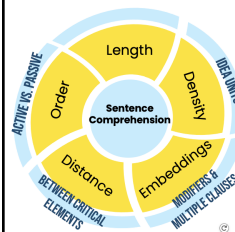
*Wolf, Gottwald, et al., (2009)*

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## Sentence Trouble Makers

Which of these do you notice in the following excerpt?



*Fuhrman, IDA, 2022*

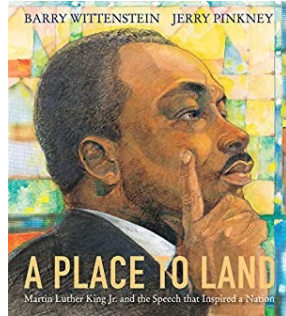
- Sentence length
- Sentences with several ideas/propositions
- Embedded modifiers and clauses
- Distance between critical elements
- Passive voice

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## Sentence Complexity

“Upstairs, alone in his suite, surrounded by rough drafts and scribbled notes on yellow legal pads, Martin saw Rosa, Fannie Lou, Emmett, Medgar, the children of Birmingham, and so many others – their faces forever seared into his memory.”



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## The Big Ideas Underpinning Syntax Instruction

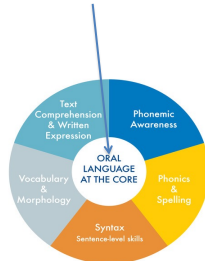
1. Oral language provides the foundation for syntax instruction.
2. Grammatical elements are the building blocks of syntax and must be explicitly taught.
3. Writing a variety of sentence structures reinforces students' ability to comprehend sentences.
4. Teachers must analyze the texts they teach as part of cognitive preparation.

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## 1. Oral language provides the foundation

- Children come to written language with syntactic knowledge in their oral language.
- Oral language tasks help develop children's ability to produce and understand a variety of sentences.
- This ability supports both reading comprehension and written expression.
- Students benefit from explicit syntax instruction that builds their syntactic awareness – a **metalinguistic skill**.



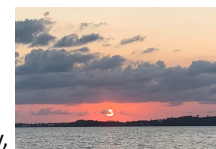
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## Syntactic Knowledge

Wow!

An amazingly beautiful sunset captured my interest yesterday, so I took numerous photos with my iphone.



- Subject-verb-object (SVO) or OVS?
- Compound or complex sentence?

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## Syntactic Awareness

“Just as students acquire phonemic awareness by manipulating the sounds in words, students develop **syntactic awareness** as they listen to, speak, read, and write sentences. As students become conscious of and reflect on the arrangements of words, they realize that word order impacts the meaning of the sentence.”

*Gillis and Eberhardt, 2018*

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## Sentence Comprehension: Asking Questions At the End Isn't Enough

**Sentence:** *Rachel Carson, who was a scientist, writer, and ecologist, grew up in the rural river town of Springdale, Pennsylvania.*

**Teacher:** What do you know about Carson now?

**Student:** They grew up together in the same place.

*Scott and Balthazar, IDA Perspectives, 2013*

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## Word order impacts meaning at the phrase level



blue sky

blue

sky



sky blue

The function of the word **sky** changed from a *noun* naming the space around the earth to an *adjective* describing the color blue.

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## A Function-based Approach

At the heart of a function-based approach is instruction about the role (i.e., function) that words and groups of words play in conveying meaning.

Sentences are comprised of **words, phrases, and clauses.**

Birds fly.

Nocturnal birds of all types fly throughout the night.

**Questions:** What kind of birds? Which ones? When do they fly?

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## 2. Grammatical elements are the building blocks of syntax

- A *finite* number of grammatical components make it possible to build an *infinite* number of syntactical structures.
- Each “block” serves a specific, meaning-based **function**.
- Together they provide the basis for all of the syntactic structures in English.

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## The Structure of Sentences

“The reader must figure out logical relationships between words to construct meaning. Those relationships are conveyed through different types of sentences.”

Nancy Hennessy, 2010

**Some sentences are tricky:**

Find the subject and predicate in each of these sentences:

*The young man the jungle gym.*

*The cotton clothing is made from grows in the south.*

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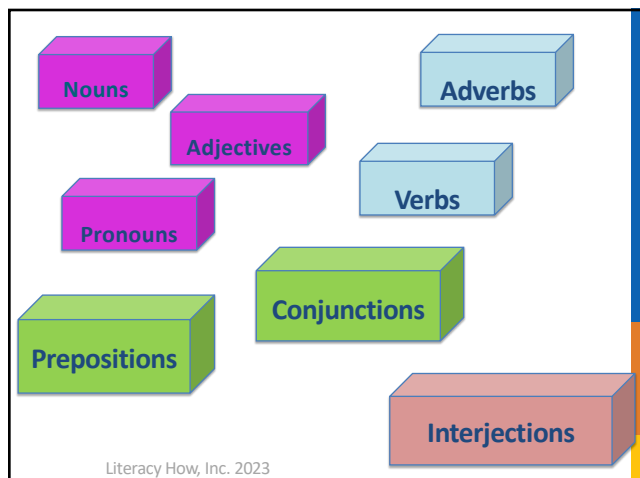
Grammar = “parts of speech”,  
a set of rules that explain how words are used  
in a given language.

*Grammar is to syntax what letters  
are to words. (Eberhardt, 2013)*

Well, she and the young boy walk to school slowly

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## Explicit Instruction for Sentence Comprehension

Grammatical awareness improves both comprehension and memory for what was read by enabling children to cluster individual words into meaningful syntactic units such as **phrases**.

*Carlisle & Rice, 2002*

“Reading instruction should include phrase-level and sentence-level instruction, not just word-level instruction, opening the potential for new and different ways of looking at instruction for adolescent struggling readers.” *Nomvette & Easterbrooks, 2019*

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## What's a Sentence?

It's a Subject and a Predicate.

The dog



sat.

When children read, the goal is for them to use their understanding about the function of words (e.g., *Who did it? What did it do?*) to facilitate comprehension. (*Gillis & Eberhardt*)

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## Explicit Instruction for Sentence Comprehension

Grammatical awareness improves both comprehension and memory for what was read by enabling children to cluster individual words into meaningful syntactic units such as **phrases**.

*Carlisle & Rice, 2002*

“Reading instruction should include phrase-level and sentence-level instruction, not just word-level instruction, opening the potential for new and different ways of looking at instruction for adolescent struggling readers.” *Nomvette & Easterbrooks, 2019*

**Phrase:** A group of words that work together to answer a functional question (e.g., *which sunset*)

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## Use meaning-based questions with text to understand phrases

In the fall, City Dog and Country Frog sat together on the rock.

WHEN?

WHERE?

HOW?

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### Use meaning-based questions with text

In the fall, City Dog and Country Frog sat together on the rock.

WHEN?	WHERE?	HOW?
in the fall	on the rock	together

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### Namers (Who) and Verbs (Do)



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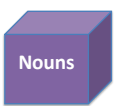
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### The Subject

Every sentence has a subject.  
The subject is who or what is doing the action.  
To identify the subject, find the verb and ask:  
Who or what \_\_\_\_\_?  
Who sat? **City Dog and Country Frog** sat together on the rock.

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**name the people, places, things, and ideas**

**Cueing question: Who or what did it?**

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## The Predicate

The predicate is what the subject is doing. It is always a verb.

- The dog **barked** (ferociously at all the passing cars.)
- Jen **biked** (around the block in search of her friends.)

To find the predicate, ask: What is the namer/ who doing? (What barked? Who biked?)

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**most**

∧ **tell what nouns do**

- Function: Tells action
- Question: **Did what?**

City Dog **jumped** with Country Frog.

**But some verbs link.**

- Function: Links
- Question: **Is what?**



City Dog **is** the frog's new friend.

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## The Object

The object tells whom or what received the action.

Ask: What did they do it to?

- City Dog spotted **a frog**.

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## Sentence Building



There are two basic sentence structures:

- A simple sentence composed of a subject plus a predicate (S + P)
- A simple sentence composed of a subject plus a predicate followed by an object (S + P + O)

Grammatical Element		
Namer (Noun or Pronoun) Who or what?	Action (Verb) Do or did what?	Namer (Noun or Pronoun) To whom or what?
The research team (S)	discovered (P)	
Researchers (S)	explored (P)	two icebergs (O)

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**Adverbs** tell more about the verb

Where? **here**, **in the country**

When? **later**, **in the spring**

How? **sadly**, **as fast as he could**

Why? **consequently**, **because he was tired**

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**Prepositions** signal a relationship between words

Some prepositional phrases describe the verb and answer these adverbial questions.

Where? The dog ran **across the wide open field**.

When? **During the summer**, City Dog taught Country Frog new games.

How? **In silence**, the friends remembered the games they played.

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**Prepositions/Adverbs**  
Prepositions are always part of a phrase

above up

from towards

between through

among beneath downward

**Where** does the action happen?

*Why are these prepositions easier than when (time) and how prepositions?*

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**Adjectives** tell more about nouns

How many? **quite a few dogs**

What kind? **new games**, **wide open field**

Which one? **the frog**

**with big eyes**

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**Prepositions** *signal a relationship between words*

Some prepositional phrases describe the noun and answer these adjectival questions:

**What kind?** The frog **with big eyes** sat on the rock.

**Which one?** The frog **on the rock** met a new friend.

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In the loveliest town of all, where the houses were white and high and the elm trees were green and higher than the houses, where the front yards were wide and pleasant and the back yards were bushy and worth finding out about, where the streets sloped down to the stream and the stream flowed quietly under the bridge, where the lawns ended in orchards and the orchards ended in fields and the fields ended in pastures and the pastures climbed the hill and disappeared over the top toward the wonderful wide sky, in this loveliest of all towns, Stuart stopped to get a drink of sarsaparilla.

*Framing Your Thoughts, Victoria Greene*

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### Sentence Deconstruction

Up the hill from the campsite the same windstorm that left him a place to land the plane – had that only been three, four days ago? – had dropped three large white pines across each other.

*Hatchet, Gary Paulsen*

Find the predicate/verb.  
Find the subject  
Is there an object?


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**Pronouns** *replace or refer to nouns*

Use the same cueing questions as nouns


The dog sat on a rock. **He** spotted a frog nearby.



**Who?**

- He – him
- She – her
- They – them

The farmhouse stood in an open space. **It** was white with many windows.



**What?**

- It – it
- They – them

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**Conjunctions** join words, phrases or clauses

Conjunctions come in two varieties:


Coordinating – join equal parts	Subordinating – join unequal parts
and	because
or	although
but	since
	after

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**Interjections** express emotion

Hmmm.... Gee Whizz!!



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### Interpret word meaning

Words with **multiple meanings** require context to determine meaning.

**season** (n) a period of a year  
(v) add flavor to food

Fall and spring are my favorite **seasons**.

The chef **seasons** the soup with garlic and basil.

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### Independent Clause

An independent clause includes a subject and a predicate and expresses a complete thought.

*The flowers bloom.*

An independent clause **is** a sentence.



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## Compound Sentences

- A sentence with 2 independent clauses.
- John went to the store, but it was closed. **(I, I)**
- Jeb is tired; Logan is not. **(I; I)**
- The clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction.
- The coordinating conjunctions are:



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## Dependent Clause

A dependent clause includes a subordinating conjunction, subject, and verb.

A dependent clause **does not** express a complete thought.

- As he left the house...
- When the door opened...
- After we eat lunch...

### Subordinate Conjunctions

after	once	until
although	provided that	when
as	rather than	whenever
because	since	where
before	so that	whereas
even if	than	wherever
even though	that	whether
if	though	while
in order that	unless	why

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## Complex Sentences

**D, I**

**Dependent Clause,  
Independent Clause.**

*Since she left for college,* she has called home five times.

*While Pat ate her pizza,* Mike poured some lemonade.

**I D**

**Independent Clause  
Dependent Clause.**

He needs your help *because the box is too heavy to carry alone.*

The movie was excellent *although I didn't care much for the ending.*

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## 3. Sentence Writing

- The function-based questions provide a metacognitive dimension to unpack the meaning of text, as well as to expand sentences to develop expressive language. How does this work?
- The process begins with meta-cognitive questions that build a base sentence.
- These questions—*Who (what) did it? and What did they (he/she/it) do?*— elicit the components of a complete sentence.

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### Formulating answers requires interpretation of academic vocabulary

Question word	Content required in answer	Examples
Who/what	A name of person, place, thing or idea	researchers, the icebergs, the research team, some fish
Did what	The action that happened	discovered, began floating, live, absorb
When	A time	recently, after they broke off a sheet of ice
Where	A location	around icebergs, in the Wendall Sea, around icebergs
How	The way something was done	from water and sunlight, with your eyes
Why	A reason	<b><i>because they live off the nutrients from the icebergs</i></b>

*Gillis & Eberhardt, 2017*

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## Determine punctuation use

### Tree's branches *versus* oak trees

Grammatical knowledge of the function of **trees**—  
possessive in the one, plural in the other—  
determines the correct use of punctuation and  
inflectional endings.

Scott (2009)

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## Sort/Match/Write

"Who/what"	"Did What"	What/When
Researchers	explored	two icebergs
The icebergs	began floating	after they broke off a sheet of ice
Nutrients	helped make	an ecosystem
Petrels and other birds	eat	the krill and fish

researchers  
the icebergs  
began floating  
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nutrients  
eat  
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helped make

two icebergs  
petrels and other birds  
the krill and fish  
an ecosystem

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## Sentence Slams

Nouns	Verbs
captain	navigate
mast	stand
rudder	steer
sail	fill
waves	splash

Figure 3. Brainstormed Noun and Verb Boxes (Topic: Sailing)

NOUNS	VERBS

- Create noun and verb boxes using the text that you're teaching.
- Post these boxes for your students to write sentence slams.
- Begin with Template 1 and have students write kernel sentences with nouns and verbs.


**Handout**

Literacy How, Inc. 2023 Haynes, Smith and Laud, 2019

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## Paragraph Shrinking...begins with "who or what"

### Paragraph Shrinking



1. Name the most important **who** or **what**.
2. Tell the most important thing about the who or what.
3. Say the main idea in 10 words or less.

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## 3 Steps to GET THE GIST

A Research-Based Practice for Identifying & Writing Brief Main Idea Statements

- STEP 1** Identify the most important "who" or "what" of the section.
- STEP 2** Identify the most important information about the "who" or "what."
- STEP 3** Combine the information to write a gist statement.

Remember, your gist should

- include only the most important information,
- leave out unnecessary details, and
- be a complete sentence.

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## Write Sentences About the Text

1. **Select** vocabulary words related to the topic.
2. **Write** kernel sentences (who/do) with selected vocabulary.
3. **Expand** the kernel sentence.


Hurricanes	<b>form</b>	over the ocean
Hurricanes	<b>move</b>	toward land
Hurricanes	<b>spin</b>	around its center

Where?

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## A Hurricane Is a Big Storm



Hurricanes are big **storms**. They form over the **ocean**. They can move toward land. Hurricanes bring lots of wind and rain.

Hurricanes are spinning **storms**. The center of the **storm** is called the eye. The weather is calm in the eye.

People can stay safe during a **storm**. They need to get ready before the **storm** arrives. They can prepare an emergency kit. People should stay inside when the **storm** comes.

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**The Thick Fog**

It was hot. There was a lot of sun. Beth and Thad go for a run.

It's fun to run on a path. Then they run up the hill. Beth and Thad love to run.

But then the sun dims. Thick fog sets in on the path.

The fog is so thick that Beth and Thad can't see. Is the path there? How will the kids see the path in the fog?

**Why did the sun get dim?**

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What kind of information is needed to answer a "why" question?

**Why** did the sun get dim?

The sun got dim because the fog got thick?

Write a sentence.

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**Writing Summaries About Text**

"Summarizing and sentence expansion demand similar skills: figuring out what's most important in a given body of information, what details support that main idea, and how the details relate to one another."

*Hochman & Wexler, 2017*

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**Activity to Write a Sentence Summary**

Who/what? Did what?

What kind? Where?

Which one? When?

How many? How?

Why?

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Sentence Summary

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

who/what: \_\_\_\_\_

(did/will do) what: \_\_\_\_\_

where: \_\_\_\_\_

where: \_\_\_\_\_

why: \_\_\_\_\_

how: \_\_\_\_\_

Summary Sentence:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_


\_\_\_\_\_

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## Sentence Scramble

“In the fall, Molly Lou Melon started school with a big yellow backpack.”



- Find the verb – the action word – the ‘do.’
- Next, find the ‘who’ – the namer, who is doing the action.
- Ask the questions: started what? Started when? Started how?

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## Sentence Combining

“... studies demonstrate that sentence combining is effective with young writers at various ability levels, including **writers with disabilities**, and may favorably impact the quality of compositions and quantity of revisions. This finding is especially significant since early intervention using effective instruction may maximize the writing development of all children, reduce the number of students who develop writing problems from poor instruction, and lessen the difficulties and motivational challenges experienced by children with writing disabilities.”

*Saddler et al, 2018*

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## 4. Analyze Your Text

Use your knowledge of syntax to anticipate which sentences in a text will be difficult for students:

1. Length (adjectives, adverbs, prepositional phrases, etc.)
2. Distance between subject and the verb
3. Number of clauses (count the verbs to figure out how many clauses)
4. Advanced connectives (however, despite, although, as a result)

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## Language Structures

### Syntax and Semantics

- sentence structure (i.e., simple, compound, complex), including the use of punctuation
- use of and relationship between words, phrases, and clauses in sentences
- coherence within and between sentences
- the way words refer to objects and concepts and how
- the way words and their referents can be understood in context(s)

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## The RAND Heuristic: Three Elements



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## Demands of the Text

- Density of propositions
- Level of vocabulary
- **Length of sentences**
- Organization
- Illustration, titles and graphics
- Appeal of writing



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## Assessing Syntax Knowledge

In the absence of formal assessments, teachers are encouraged to observe their students':

- Grammatical knowledge (i.e., how nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions and conjunctions function in a sentence)
- Syntactic awareness (i.e., understanding of syntactic structures – subject, predicate, direct and indirect object; clauses and phrases)
- Understanding of various sentence structures (i.e., simple, compound, and complex)
- Use of correct verb tense and subject-verb agreement

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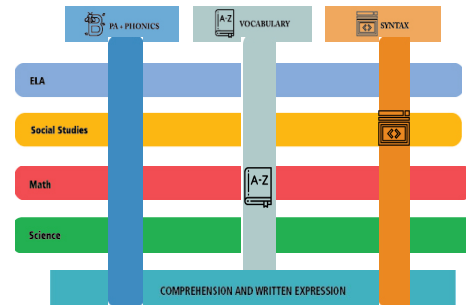
### Structured Literacy Writing Instruction (Jennings and Haynes, 2018)

- Employ theme-centered pictures and objects to activate prior knowledge and stimulate word retrieval
- Teach a developmental sequence of sentence patterns
- Work on verb tense (i.e., regular and irregular past tense)
- Employ listening, speaking, reading and writing in exercises for teaching each new sentence pattern

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### Integrating Literacy Across Content Subjects



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### Summary

- Syntactic awareness contributes to text comprehension.
- The explicit teaching of syntax fosters syntactic knowledge.
- Teach the function of words in sentences rather than rote memorization and identification of 'parts of speech.'
- Syntax plays an important role in the ability to read fluently, comprehend text, **and write** a variety of simple, compound, and complex sentences.
- Analyze text for possible sentence level difficulties.

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### Key Content to Know and Teach

Content	Need to know	Need to teach
Terms: syntactic knowledge, syntactic awareness	✓	
Words that link meaning (i.e., prepositions, pronouns, and conjunctions)	✓	✓
Sentence structure (i.e., phrases, clauses)	✓	✓
Text analysis (i.e., cognitive preparation)	✓	
Features of effective instructional practice	✓	✓

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## Thank You!

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## Frozen Home

### Meet the creatures whose homes are frozen, floating mountains.

Icebergs melt and fall apart as they drift through the ocean. Researchers saw a huge waterfall pouring off one of the icebergs as it melted.



James Slaughter/National Science Foundation

*A giant petrel chick. Petrels and other birds fly between icebergs.*

Scientists recently discovered that some of the world's coolest critters live around icebergs.

Researchers explored two icebergs in the Weddell Sea near Antarctica. The icebergs began floating after they broke off a sheet of ice that was connected to land. One of the icebergs was 13 miles long. The other iceberg reached 1,000 feet below the surface of the sea. That's longer than three football fields!

The research team discovered that water from the melted icebergs had nutrients. Nutrients are the parts of food that help animals and plants grow.

The nutrients from the icebergs helped make an ecosystem. An ecosystem is an environment in which animals and plants depend on one another to live. Take a look at the animals and plants that live in the iceberg ecosystem.

Petrels and other birds fly between icebergs. They eat the krill and fish that live around icebergs.

Some fish, such as silverfish, live in very cold water. They eat plankton, krill, and other small animals.

Plankton are animals and plants that float in seawater. They absorb nutrients from water and sunlight. They are too small to see with your eyes.

Krill are tiny animals that look like shrimp. Krill eat plankton.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Day: \_\_\_\_\_

## Kernel Sentences

**VERBS FOR NOT ALIVE (INANIMATE) NOUNS**

sat lay stood rested leaned  
hovered stretched hung spread

ARTICLE	NOUN	ACTION VERB+ED