

# Grammar – Sentence Building

## How to Make Sentence Blocks

1. T (teacher) or a SS (student or students) writes one or more sentences on the board (these are the 'starting sentences'). T writes a wh- question word underneath, e.g. what, where, why, when, etc.
2. SS work in pairs making sentence blocks. One starts and the other follows, then they change the order. T monitors, checks, and corrects. T ensures that nobody is writing down the 8 sentences. The activity should be done from memory, using the information on the board.
3. Group feedback – T asks a few pairs to model one or more complete sentence block. T elicits corrections from other SS if there are any errors.
4. If SS are new to making sentence blocks, T should go through the procedure, using a pair of SS to model it. T should encourage SS to achieve the correct pronunciation, sentence and word stress, rhythm, and intonation. Some SS may have a tendency to say all of their lines with a questioning intonation at the end. Of course, this should be discouraged, except for yes/no questions. This is the basic procedure:

- a) T explains that there are 7 lines in a sentence block and 8 different sentences. The first line is on the board, along with a wh- question word. Student A reads it, e.g.

**I went to the park yesterday.** (Line 1)  
WHEN

- b) Student B asks a question based on the sentence using the wh- question word.

**When did you go to the park?** (Line 2)

- c) Student A gives a short answer, based on the information in the first sentence.

**Yesterday.** (Line 3)

- d) Recap: both SS repeat this short 3-line dialogue a few times – from memory, if possible.

- e) Student B asks a yes/no question based on the original sentence to get a positive answer.

**Did you go to the park yesterday?** (Line 4)

- f) Student A replies with a short positive answer.

**Yes, I did.** (Line 5)

- g) Recap: both SS repeat this short 5-line dialogue a few times – from memory, if possible.

- h) Student B asks a yes/no question based on the starting sentence, but changes the part of the sentence that the wh- question relates to – in order to get a negative answer.

**Did you go the park two days ago?** (Line 6)

- i) Student A replies with a short negative answer; then a second sentence, which is a long negative answer.

**No, I didn't. I didn't go to the park two days ago.** (Line 7)

- j) Student B could continue by repeating the wh- question with "So..."

**So, when did you go to the park?**

- k) ...and Student A replies with the third line, and both continue the rest of the sentence block:

Student A: **Yesterday.**

Student B: **Did you go to the park yesterday?**

Student A: **Yes, I did.**

...and so on.

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5. SS could make different sentence blocks with the same sentence by using different wh- question words that fit, for example in this sentence you could ask 5 different wh- questions:

I	went	to the park	yesterday.
WHO	WHAT (x2)	WHERE	WHEN

Question:

Short Answer:

WHO went to the park yesterday?

I did.

WHAT did you do yesterday?

I went to the park.

WHAT happened yesterday?

I went to the park.

WHERE did you go yesterday?

To the park.

WHEN did you go to the park?

Yesterday.

### Tips:

- You could use any suitable sentence. Don't choose one that is too long or too complex to begin with – up to ten words should be fine. You should choose a positive starting sentence, rather than a negative one, because the negative sentences will come later in the sentence block.
- T could ask two of the stronger SS to model the activity with T eliciting the answers – and appealing to the whole class to suggest the answers – while all the time emphasising the 7 line/8 sentence structure.
- T could ensure that a range of tenses are being practised, e.g. if there are four different sentences on the board, the main verb in each one could be from a different tense. Or, SS could practise a particular tense with all the sentences having the same form of main verb.
- There are various additional ways of practising forming sentence blocks verbally:
  - ✓ SS say one line or one word each, going around the group in a circle.
  - ✓ SS chant a complete sentence block together as a group.
  - ✓ T says a random line from a sentence block and asks a SS to produce the next line.
  - ✓ SS sit back to back in pairs and say one line each, then reverse who starts.
  - ✓ T chooses random SS to give a particular line of a sentence block, e.g. if T says, "Line 3" the SS has to say only line 3 (the answer to the wh- question).
- This is a great activity for practising not only verb forms, but also pronunciation, and sentence building – including all kinds of embedded grammar structures. The starting sentences can all contain embedded grammar, which means grammar that occurs as a natural part of the sentence block as it is being spoken and automatically memorised, rather than grammar that is explicitly presented to students as an isolated grammar topic. Embedded grammar may include: articles, prepositions, singular/plural, gerunds, etc. Of course, any of these topics could also be explored in more detail during a grammar point session.
- T can vary the level of this activity – simply adjust the level of the starting sentence(s), e.g. simple sentences and tenses for low-level learners, and more complex sentences and verb forms for higher-level learners. The mechanics of the activity remain the same, regardless of the level or tense of the sentence. Here is an example with a beginner-level starting sentence:

I like strong coffee.  
WHAT do you like?  
Strong coffee.  
Do you like strong coffee?  
Yes, I do.  
Do you like weak coffee?  
No, I don't. I don't like weak coffee.  
So, what do you like?

...and so on.

- T can vary the length of this activity: to make it shorter, use fewer sentences and wh- question words; to make it longer, use more.
- This is a wonderful activity to get SS thinking in English while speaking and listening with a partner, compared with the multiple reading and gap-fill tasks in a typical ELT coursebook. It is great to watch SS deliberating as they try to work out the next line of a sentence block!

Taken from *You Are The Course Book – Lesson Plans* (2014) by Matt Purland