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Writing in subject English

Highlighting the use of simple, compound and complex sentences in student writing

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This practice guide is one in a series that focuses on the types of sentences students should use in their writing in the subjects of English, Science and Health and Physical Education.

It has been developed for secondary English teachers and builds on the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s [simple](#), [compound](#) and [complex](#) sentence practice guides. It offers guidance for analysing and providing targeted feedback on your students' sentence structure, grammar and punctuation. We recommend referring to the glossary in the [simple sentence practice guide](#) for definitions of key technical terms used in this practice guide.

Whether you're an experienced teacher or new to the field, this practice guide is designed to enhance your ability to teach simple, compound and complex sentences in English. Through exploring annotated writing samples written at a Year 8 level, we hope you'll gain valuable insights into the impact of teaching specific sentence types and providing targeted feedback to improve student writing.

1. A refresher on sentences

Simple sentences: must have one independent clause (makes sense on its own) that forms a complete idea.

Simple sentences can have a powerful impact on narrative writing. They allow you to control the pace of a story. They help to create tension. They demand attention.

Compound sentences: are created when 2 or more independent clauses are joined using a conjunction or a punctuation mark (a semicolon) to show a connection between 2 (or more) ideas.

Compound sentences bring clarity and enable you to build vivid descriptions of characters and settings. They help to connect ideas and provide a natural flow to a narrative.

Complex sentences: contain one independent clause and one or more dependent clauses.

Complex sentences are critical when it comes to conveying complex information and expressing abstract ideas in student writing. Important information can be strategically placed at the beginning or end of a complex sentence, effectively drawing attention to the most important points.



2. Simple, compound and complex sentences in English literature

Authors of famous literary works are known for their deliberate choices when it comes to sentence types and the thoughtful arrangement of sentences within their stories. They skilfully employ a variety of sentence structures to keep readers fully engaged in their narratives.

For example, simple sentences can be used to create impactful moments, allowing certain phrases to resonate deeply with the reader. Compound and complex sentences on the other hand can enhance a story with rich details and help to control the pace.

Sentence selection is a meticulous and precise process. Consider the effect the following sentences have on you as a reader.

Sentence selection: The first line of a novel

‘You’ve been here before.’ (*Needful Things* – Stephen King) **(simple)**

‘Call me Ishmael.’ (*Moby Dick* – Herman Melville) **(simple)**

‘All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.’ (*Anna Karenina* – Leo Tolstoy) **(compound)**

‘The drought had lasted now for ten million years, and the reign of the terrible lizards had long since ended.’ (*2001: A Space Odyssey* – Arthur C. Clarke) **(compound)**

‘If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other book.’ (*The Bad Beginning* – Lemony Snicket aka Daniel Handler) **(complex)**

‘When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton.’ (*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* – J. R. R. Tolkien) **(complex)**

Sentence selection: The last line of a novel

‘Are there any questions?’ (*The Handmaid’s Tale* – Margaret Atwood) **(simple)**

‘He loved Big Brother.’ (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* – George Orwell) **(simple)**

‘There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air.’ (*The Awakening* – Kate Chopin) **(compound)**

‘She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.’ (*The Grapes of Wrath* – John Steinbeck) **(compound)**

‘My brother Davy’s not the sort of bloke who ever let anyone down, you know...’ (*My Brother Jack* – George Johnston) **(complex)**

‘What I have been trying so hard to tell you all along is simply that my father, without the slightest doubt, was the most marvellous and exciting father any boy ever had.’ (*Danny the Champion of the World* – Roald Dahl) **(complex)**

3. Student writing samples and feedback: Focusing on simple, compound and complex sentences

A good piece of writing in English will:

- **expand on a range of ideas.** This can be achieved using effective sentence structures, which can provide additional detail to emphasise different points and convey information accurately.
- **include a variety of sentence types.** This makes a text more sophisticated and enables the writer to effectively communicate and demonstrate their understanding of content.
- **incorporate appropriate vocabulary to suit text type and purpose.** This enhances the quality of a piece of writing and ensures that it is clear, accurate and credible. It also demonstrates the writer's understanding of different audiences and their needs. For example, in critical and analytical writing there needs to be greater precision which can be achieved by using nominalisation (the process of transforming a verb or clause into a noun or noun group). This supports students in transitioning from writing that resembles speech and uses action/verb orientated language towards a more abstract and technical style of writing.

With this in mind, we have analysed three Year 8 English writing samples from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)¹ to explore the types of sentences used and then examine whether the author has been effective in communicating their ideas to the reader. The sentence types have been highlighted in different colours (teal for simple sentences, purple for compound sentences and orange for complex sentences), and the verbs in each sentence have been marked in bold. Each sample has been assessed and comments have been made regarding the effectiveness of the sentence types used in relation to the subject area: English.

Looking at the sentence level of writing allows us to consider what sentences are the most effective in communicating understanding, while also providing insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the students' writing. The aim is to assist you to identify areas for improvement in students' writing.

1 As the samples used are real pieces of student work, some contain spelling mistakes and grammatical errors.

Writing sample 1

Persuasive writing in English²

(complex) I **belive** that Italy **is** a special place. **(compound)** It **has** many old bulidings and the country **has** many foods. **(compound)** Italy **is** located in Europe and **is** very close to other countries. **(simple)** In Italy they **speak** Italian and English. **(compound)** I **have visited** Italy twice and **have seen** many great tourist attractions e.g. the colosome. **(simple)** The following paragraphs **will state** the importanace and the significance.

(complex) Firstly I **believe** that Italy **is** very important and significant because of the buildings they **have**. **(complex)** A particular, well known attraction in Italy **is** the Coloseume located in Rome. **(simple)** People all over the world **come to see** these extoridinary places. **(simple)** Italy **is** also **known** for its art and it's prestige bulidings. **(compound)** In Veinence they **don't have** roads instead thet **have** rivers. **(complex)** This **might sound** unusal but it **makes** Italy into the unique country we **remember** them by. **(complex)** In conclusion I strongly **believe** that Italy **is** a well respected and well known country.



² Sections of this student's work have been used to illustrate writing features.

Key takeaways

Student writing: ‘I believe that Italy is a special place.’

Teacher feedback: In written arguments, it is often more persuasive to present statements with conviction rather than using introductory phrases like ‘I believe.’ Asserting confidently that ‘Italy is a special place’ would be a stronger opening sentence.

Student writing: ‘Firstly I believe that Italy is very important and significant because of the buildings they have.’

Teacher feedback: While this sentence is intending to offer an opinion, the subject, verb and object do not agree, and it ends with a verb. By using a pronoun, it does not take an abstract perspective, which in this instance weakens the writer’s argument. Revised, this sentence could read: ‘The unique buildings in Italy make it a very special place.’

Student writing: ‘This might sound unusual but it makes Italy into the unique country we remember them by.’

Teacher feedback: When referring to Italy, the appropriate pronoun ‘it’ should be used instead of ‘them’. This can create confusion and detracts from the formality of the writing. Eliminating the pronoun and adopting a more formal tone, the sentence could read: ‘Some might consider this unusual, yet this distinctive feature makes Italy a truly unique country.’

Student writing: ‘People all over the world come to see these extoridinary places.’

Teacher feedback: Using prepositional phrases would enhance the level of detail in the simple sentences in this text. This sentence could be revised to answer a question such as ‘When?’ or ‘Why?’ – for example, ‘Every year, people from all over the world come to see these extraordinary places.’

Student writing: ‘I have visited Italy twice and have seen many great tourist attractions e.g. the colosome.’

Teacher feedback: This could be revised to include an adverbial clause at the start of the sentence, for example: ‘During my two visits to Italy, I had the pleasure of experiencing iconic tourist attractions like the Colosseum.’

Student writing: ‘In Veinence they don’t have roads instead that have rivers.’

Teacher feedback: Here, the student has an opportunity to change a grammatically incorrect compound sentence to a simple sentence through nominalisation, for example: ‘Venice is unique due to its use of canals for transportation.’

Summary

The student’s writing could be more persuasive by replacing the ‘speech-like’ compound and complex sentences. There are sentences where the student demonstrates a limited vocabulary and requires assistance with their syntax. The ability to embed noun phrases and clauses in complex sentences would allow the student to demonstrate their ideas coherently and create logical connections. The student would benefit from some explicit instruction relating to sentence structure, including punctuation and nominalisation. This would support students to strategically use a range of sentence types to communicate their arguments and develop a clear, formal style of writing.

Writing sample 2

Persuasive writing in English³

(compound) Beaches **are** a lot of fun and you **can't not have** fun at a beach! **(complex)** There **are** many different activities you **can do** there that **are** a lot of fun especially with family or friends. **(simple)** Some activities **are** surfing, splashing around in the waves, building sandcastles, looking in rock pools, swimming or just sitting around relaxing. **(simple)** There **is** something for everyone to do no matter your age. **(compound)** Younger children **can paddle** around in the shallow water or **build** sandcastles or even **bury** parents or siblings!

(complex) Another thing I **love** about the beach **is** the amazing memories you **can make** there.

(simple) With all the fun things to do you **will have** fun no matter what. **(complex)** Going to get fish and chips and icecream for lunch **is** almost a tradition when you **go** to the beach. **(complex)** If a beach **has** a pier that you **can walk** along it's a huge bonus! **(simple)** It's a great way to see more of what's under the water without having to actually go in it! **(simple)** Many times I **have seen** fish, shells, crabs and even stingrays while out on a pier!!

(simple) The beach **is** also a great place to exercise!! **(complex)** Running and walking on the beach **is** a lot harder because the sand **is** so tricky and slippery to run on. **(complex)** This **means** you **get** a better workout. **(complex)** You **can** also **tan** while exercising or as a break so you **can get** muscular and tanned! **(simple)** Swimming **is** also great exercise. **(complex)** Even though it **may not seem** like it, simply splashing your friends and ten darting away **is** great exercise!



³ Sections of this student's work have been used to illustrate writing features.

Key takeaways

Student writing: ‘There are many different activities you can do there that are a lot of fun especially with family or friends.’

Student writing: ‘With all the fun things to do you will have fun no matter what.’

Teacher feedback: Several words are repeated throughout the text, demonstrating the need to consider expanding vocabulary options. This makes the text less engaging to read, and slightly monotonous.

Student writing: ‘It’s a great way to see more of what’s under the water without having to actually go in it! Many times I have seen fish, shells, crabs and even stingrays while out on a pier!!’

Teacher feedback: Joining these 2 simple sentences using a semicolon would result in the following revised compound sentence: ‘It’s a great way to see more of what’s under the water without having to actually go in; I’ve often spotted fish, shells, crabs and even stingrays!’

This minor tweak combines the 2 related ideas into a single sentence, providing a smoother flow of information.

Student writing: ‘There are many different activities you can do there that are a lot of fun especially with family or friends.’

Teacher feedback: This sentence includes an adjectival clause introduced by the relative pronoun ‘that’ but lacks clarity due to the absence of proper punctuation.

Correctly punctuated, the sentence reads: ‘There are many different activities you can do there that are a lot of fun, especially with family or friends.’

This revised sentence is both easier for the reader to understand, and more pleasant to read because of the flow it creates.

Summary

This sample includes a combination of simple and complex sentences and the student is developing some control over their structure. The inclusion of more compound sentences would add further variety to this text and make it more engaging for the reader. The sample shows the beginning of an elaboration of ideas using dependent clauses and experimentation with a range of subordinating conjunctions. A greater focus on correct punctuation (for example, commas) would make the writing much easier to read.

Writing sample 3

Persuasive writing in English⁴

(simple) Arra Warra in New South Wales **is** definitely special. **(complex)** It **is** for everyone who **likes** the beach, **loves** the great outdoors or for anyone wanting to get away from work. **(simple)** There **is** room for anyone wanting to go camping or staying in a cabin. **(complex)** You **can come** down with your family and **camp, swim** and many more great, entertaining activities.

(complex) Arra Warra **is** a special place because you **can do** anything you **want to do**, with no one bossing you around. **(complex)** There **are** many activities you **can participate** in such as surfing or surfing lessons and wave rafting. **(simple)** You **can even go** fishing, boogy-boarding and **play** beach cricket! **(compound)** The camping grounds also **specialises** in hosting people back-packing from numerous continents like Europe and America, and you **get to meet** some really cool people. **(simple)** But best of all, you **have** more time with family and friends.

(complex) When staying with family and friends you **are able to get** a hold of large campsites or cabins to keep you all together. **(complex)** The adults **can hang out** at night telling stories and enjoying themselves, while the kids **run** around playing games or tracking down 'Ghost' crabs on the beach! **(complex)** The campsite **is** also animal friendly, so you **can bring down** your pets and **have** a great time with them while they **enjoy** the fresh air and water. **(complex)** Just **don't let** them **get used to** it, they **might start** hogging the waves all to themselves!

(complex) The best time to come down if you **want** good weather conditions and surf, **is** Easter. **(simple)** The water **is** nearly always that crystal clear blue, with the water temperature, just right! **(complex)** Once you've found your groove and **are** happy, just **grab** a board and ta-da! **(simple)** You **will look** like a surfing pro cruising those amazing waves. **(complex)** But **don't forget**, if you **can't surf** and **want to look** like a pro, just **enquire** about surfing lessons with the camp Mojo staff and they'll **organise** a session for you.

4 Sections of this student's work have been used to illustrate writing features.

Key takeaways

Student writing: 'Arra Warra in New South Wales is definitely special. It is for everyone who likes the beach, loves the great outdoors or for anyone wanting to get away from work. There is room for anyone wanting to go camping or staying in a cabin. You can come down with your family and camp, swim and many more great, entertaining activities.'

Teacher feedback: Here, the student starts with a simple sentence which provides a clear and direct introduction to the topic. The complex sentence that comes next uses modal verbs to influence while also offering specific examples of who would enjoy the special place. A simple sentence follows allowing further elaboration of accommodation options.

The final complex sentence embeds an adverbial clause to provide more information regarding Arra Warra's appeal. This combination of sentences ensures the first paragraph is informative and engaging.

Student writing: 'Arra Warra is a special place because you can do anything you want to do, with no one bossing you around.'

Teacher feedback: The complex sentences used in this text create emphasis while also conveying more complex ideas. Varying the positions of the dependent clauses allows the student to provide additional supporting details about their special place.

Student writing: 'Once you've found your groove and are happy, just grab a board and ta-da!'

Teacher feedback: This sentence also strategically uses the pronoun 'you've' to create engagement, inviting the reader to imagine themselves in Arra Warra.

Student writing: 'The **camping grounds** also **specialises** in hosting people back-packing from numerous continents like Europe and America, and you get to meet some really cool people.'

Teacher feedback: The subject 'camping grounds' is plural, while the verb 'specialises' is singular, creating a lack of subject-verb agreement. The verb here should be 'specialise' to match the subject.

Student writing: 'I mostly find this place special **however, because** you can just go with the flow, with no jobs in the way of fun.'

Teacher feedback: The phrase 'however, because' creates a structural issue. 'However' introduces contrast, while 'because' is used to provide a reason. By using only one of these conjunctions, the student could convey their idea more concisely, for example: 'I find this place special because you can just go with the flow, with no jobs in the way of fun.'

Summary

For students to write effectively they must utilise a combination of simple, compound and complex sentences to communicate their ideas. This student demonstrates a level of control over their sentence structure, ensuring the text does not become repetitive or monotonous for the reader. Each sentence plays a role in expanding on the description of a particular place – in this case, Arra Warra in New South Wales. This level of clarity helps the reader to follow the argument and understand the point of view being presented. Incorporating some more compound sentences would further enhance this piece, adding greater variety and depth. By strategically employing a deliberate mix of sentence types, the student could produce a more polished, sophisticated text.

While there are a few minor errors present in the text, these do not significantly impact the overall effectiveness of this piece. Providing targeted instruction in these areas, specifically relating to subject-verb agreement and the appropriate usage of different conjunctions, would further refine the student's writing skills.

4. Suggested teaching activities

Simple, compound and complex sentences

1. Present new learning
 - a. Provide students with an example of writing (for example, a passage from a novel, news article).
 - b. Identify the simple, compound and complex sentences in the text as you explain and demonstrate their function in English.
 - c. Model writing a simple, compound and complex sentence to summarise the main ideas in the text.
2. Guided practice
 - a. Support students to work in pairs or small groups to identify simple, compound and complex sentences in the text provided, using worked examples.
 - b. Ask students what types of sentences this topic or text type uses and discuss the effect of combining sentence types.
 - c. Working together, students can practise writing a simple, compound and complex sentence to summarise the main ideas in the text.
3. Independent practice
 - a. Students identify simple, compound and complex sentences in the text provided, using worked examples to guide them.
 - b. Using the text as a model, they can practise using a variety of sentence types in their own writing.
 - c. Monitor initial attempts and plan time for continual practice.
 - d. Provide correction and feedback.

Pre-writing activity: Verbs

1. Present new learning
 - a. Provide students with a topic (for example, a novel, unit of study, such as 'Parvana' by Deborah Ellis).
 - b. Explain and demonstrate the function of verbs in relation to this topic.
 - c. Generate a list of verbs related to the topic – for example:
 - survive
 - disguise
 - struggle
 - search
 - provide
 - escape
 - d. Model using the verbs in simple, compound and complex sentences about the topic – for example:
 - Parvana **searches** tirelessly for her missing father.
 - Parvana **survived** the harsh realities of war in Kabul; she **disguised** herself as a boy for protection.
 - As they **struggle** to provide for their families amidst the chaos of war, Parvana and Shauzia **find** strength and solace in their enduring friendship.
2. Guided practice
 - a. Ask students to select a verb/s from the list to practise writing simple, compound and complex sentences about the topic.
 - b. Provide correction and feedback.

3. Independent practice

- a. Students generate their own list of verbs and practise using them to write a range of simple, compound and complex sentences about the topic.
- b. Monitor initial attempts and plan time for continual practice.
- c. Provide correction and feedback.

Pre-writing activity: Nouns

1. Present new learning

- a. Explain and demonstrate the function of nouns in relation to a topic (for example, 'The Dressmaker' by Rosalie Ham).
- b. Generate a list of nouns related to the topic – for example:
 - dressmaker
 - Tilly Dunnage
 - women
 - past
 - identity
 - redemption
 - revenge
- c. Model using the nouns in simple, compound and complex sentences about the topic – for example:
 - **Tilly Dunnage** is a talented **dressmaker** with a mysterious **past**.
 - **Tilly** transforms the local **women** with her exquisite designs, and she empowers them to embrace their true **identities**.
 - While **Tilly** is motivated by **revenge**, the theme of **redemption** offers a path towards healing and reconciliation.

2. Guided practice

- a. Ask students to select a noun/s from the list to practise writing simple, compound and complex sentences about the topic.
- b. Provide correction and feedback.

3. Independent practice

- a. Students generate their own list of nouns and practise using them to write a range of simple, compound and complex sentences about the topic.
- b. Monitor initial attempts and plan time for continual practice.
- c. Provide correction and feedback.