



Simple sentences: are not necessarily simple!

This guide is intended to provide a starting point for you to approach the teaching of writing in your classroom. Good writing will generally feature a mix of sentence types, all of which are structured and punctuated correctly. It is important to note that the choice and mix of sentences in a text should be informed by an understanding of the purpose and audience for the writing. The choice of sentence types may also be influenced by the genre of the writing, which will be informed by the curriculum area for which it is being produced. This is why writing needs to be taught explicitly and systematically, across all year levels and subjects, beginning with the essential foundation of sentences.

The first step in explicitly teaching writing is to have a baseline of clear definitions of grammatical terms, including examples that can immediately be used in the classroom. We want you to have clarity about what simple sentences are, and confidence in providing clear examples to your students.

For simple sentences to have maximum impact, teachers and students need to understand their function, and how to use them in all subject areas. And yes, simple sentences need to be taught in both primary and secondary classes!

This is the first in a suite of guides designed to help teachers explain and demonstrate the fundamentals of writing to their students. The content increases in complexity across the guides, so it is helpful to read them in order. These guides take a functional view of language as it aligns with the Australian Curriculum: English. This means the parts of speech are considered in terms of what they are doing in a sentence, as well as their formal characteristics.¹

1. Simple sentences: are not necessarily simple!
2. Compound sentences: adding interest.
3. Complex sentences: creating agility and depth in your writing.



1. Words and syntax – understanding the basic building blocks

When we first learn to speak, we naturally acquire speech through immersion and engagement with language, as we interact with adults and siblings. This acquisition helps us to understand how to organise our words to communicate and interact with people in our environment. Using words or **parts of speech** in a conventional order is our first step into **controlling syntax**. In addition, some of the conventions of syntax are optional and others mandatory.

Speaking is more natural than writing, because it happens between people, in real time, so that we receive immediate feedback. By comparison, writing is more structured, can have different tones (formal/informal), be reflective (or abstract) and can be used to express time (past, present, and future). When we consider how students start writing, it makes sense that their writing first resembles how they speak and is often connected to concrete understandings of their world.

One of the foundations of learning to write sentences is understanding the rules and functions of syntax. Quite simply, **syntax** is the arrangement of words to form coherent sentences. When we understand syntax, we have a shared language to explain the possibilities and constraints for writing sentences.

In order to progress students to more formal and abstract writing, we need to make explicit links between the parts of speech and how they are ordered to form sentences.

Syntax	Description	Examples
Verbs		
Finite	Express time and have a definite tense. Verbs must agree with their subjects.	The traffic is moving. The traffic has moved. The traffic may have moved.
Participles	Are additions to finite verbs that help to locate the verbs in time.	Help: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helping (continuous present) Helped (past)
Auxiliaries	Help verbs to express time.	The girl has been playing netball. (time) The girl will be playing netball. (time)
Modal	Express obligation and probability.	The girl must shoot a goal. (obligation) The girl will shoot a goal. (probability)
Adverbs	Give extra information about a verb or adjective to indicate such things as: when; where; how or in what circumstance.	Interest ingly , I have more snaps than my brother. I can see clear ly now the fog has gone. He was always trying his best.
Gerunds	Act as nouns. This means that the word that usually acts as the 'action' in the sentence becomes the 'thing'.	I'm hoping for a personal best in running . My dog loves running and jumping .
Infinitives	Are a special type of verb that can be used as a noun, adjective, or adverb. They typically follow the word ' to ' in a sentence.	I want to swim (to swim is the infinitive – swim has been changed from a verb to a noun) They were old enough to drive but not to vote .
Nouns		
Common nouns	Can be a person, place, thing, or idea.	The car was incredibly fast. The girl had an awesome mullet . I hope we can have sheep brains for dinner .
Proper nouns	Are names or titles of a specific person, place, or thing and start with a capital letter.	The Cronulla Sharks are going to win the rugby league premiership this year. Mr Murkle is a comical teacher.
Pronouns	Stand in place of a noun, noun group or name.	She was a creative artist. You really need to eat that pickle. They are the most annoying chickens.
Adjectives	Describe, evaluate, or define the meaning of a noun. They come before the noun they are modifying.	The big, purple eggplant. The quiet, stoic batsman stepped up to the crease.
Other parts of speech		
Articles	There are two types of articles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Definite (the) Indefinite (a/an) They are used in order to tell us that a noun or noun group is about to follow.	The bike was parked next to the Ferrari. The man has an enormous nose.
Conjunctions	Coordinate or locate phases or clauses and join these groups together. Some examples are: after, although, as, because, if, once, until, where, whether, while, and yet.	I enjoy jumping and laughing, but not at the same time. I can train for swimming until 7 o'clock.
Prepositions	Locate nouns, pronouns and noun groups in time, space, or circumstance. Remember 'position' – a preposition tells you the position of the noun.	In the morning, before I get out of bed, I like to sing the national anthem.

2. Phrases and clauses

Before moving to simple sentences, it's important to understand two other key terms that are critical building blocks of sentences – **phrases and clauses**. Phrases and clauses are essentially **groups of words** within a sentence. They are important because they help us to be deliberate with how we shape our writing.

Identifying and understanding their role in a sentence is the first step in deliberately controlling your writing and clarifying the difference between simple, compound, and complex sentences.

2.1. Phrases

A phrase is a group of words within a sentence. **It does not make sense on its own**. This is because it doesn't contain a **complete verb or a subject** – its primary purpose is to add information to a sentence.

Phrases tell us where, why, or how something happened, and they add variety to the way we write.

You trod **on a smelly snail**.

Byron invited me **to the gym in the city on Saturday morning**.

The chef, **locked in the kitchen for several hours**, finally produced something good to eat.



There are five types of phrases:

Verb phrase	should have gone
Adverbial phrase	quite happily
Noun phrase	the challenge of problem cicadas
Adjectival phrase	seriously smelly
Prepositional phrase	before the sunset

2.2. Clauses

Clauses are groups of words that **contain a finite verb and its subject**. The 2 main types of clauses are **independent** clauses and **dependent** clauses.

2.2.1. Independent clauses (or main clauses)

An independent clause usually makes sense on its own or combined with other clauses to form a sentence. In order to make complete sense it must contain a subject and a **finite verb**.

I **hate** Instagram.

[Single independent clause]

I **hate** Instagram. I **love** Snapchat.

[Two independent clauses]

I **hate** Instagram but I **love** Snapchat.

[Two independent clauses are joined by a coordinating conjunction]

2.2.2. Dependent clauses (or subordinate clauses)

Dependent clauses **do not make sense on their own**. They cannot exist without an independent clause – they are **‘dependent’ on the independent clause**. The purpose of a dependent clause is to provide the sentence with more information. It essentially makes the independent clause look good (and a little bit fancy)!

I hate Instagram, **because it is filled with advertisements**.

[The dependent clause tells us why Instagram is hated]

Instagram, **which is owned by Meta**, is overrated.

[The dependent clause gives us more information]





3. Defining sentences

Now that we have defined all the parts of speech, let's look at sentences. As you know, a sentence is a group of words that makes sense and is complete in itself. It also can be described as a fully expressed idea, marked by a capital letter and full stop.

3.1. Sentence functions

There are 4 sentence functions that reflect the intention of the speaker or writer.

1. The function of a **declarative sentence** is to inform or make a statement.

The boy hit the ball.

2. The function of an **exclamative sentence** is to make an exclamation or to express an idea with strong feeling.

Oh boy, what a hit!

3. The function of an **imperative sentence** is to command, instruct, or request.

Hit the ball!

4. The function of an **interrogative sentence** is to ask a question.

How far did he hit the ball?

This guide will be focusing exclusively on **declarative sentences**.

A simple sentence must make complete sense or represent a complete thought on its own.

4. The simple sentence structure

The key to understanding simple sentences is to be able to identify the parts of speech that make up a sentence. A simple sentence must have one independent clause (makes sense on its own) that forms a complete idea. Let's look at the elements of a simple sentence:

- a. A subject and a finite verb
- b. The subject and verb agree
- c. May have an object
- d. May include phrases that provide more information.

4.1. Let's unpack...

4.1.1. Subject and finite verb

The subject is the person or thing in a sentence or clause that 'controls' the verb. It essentially gives the verb a reason to exist. The easiest way to identify the subject in a sentence is first to identify the verb and ask the question, **'Who or what controls the verb?'**

Let's have a go! We will start by identifying the verb and then work out the subject.

The rugby team played brilliantly today.

[Verb: played, Subject: **the rugby team**]

The tree grew several metres in one year.

[Verb: grew, Subject: **the tree**]

She comforted the puppy.

[Verb: comforted, Subject: **She**]

4.1.2. The subject and verb agree

Like all successful partnerships, there is not going to be a great outcome unless you both agree. This is particularly true of sentences. When we look at sentence structure this means that if the **subject is singular then the verb must be singular**. If the **subject is plural, then the verb must be plural** as well.

The **maggie sings** [singular subject]

The **magpies sing** [plural]

One way to see the function of a verb is that it locates the subject in time. This means that it may need to change its form to agree with its subject.

The magpie **likes** to sing at the break of dawn. [singular subject]

The magpies **like** to sing at the break of dawn. [plural subjects]



4.1.3. The sentence may have an object

The object is a noun (or noun group) that follows the verb. If you can't find the 'object' in the sentence, ask the question, **'What is being affected by the verb?'**

The bikies carried a first aid kit.

To identify the object in the example above, ask the question, **'What was carried?'** (The answer being, 'a first aid kit'.)

4.1.4. Phrases that provide more information

There are a couple of ways simple sentences can contain phrases.

Prepositional phrases in simple sentences

A simple sentence has only one independent clause that makes complete sense. A simple sentence may also include a prepositional phrase.

Let's have a look at this example:

The council should keep the local park.

[Independent clause]

The council should keep the local park **near the shopping centre.**

[Independent clause + a prepositional phrase]

Appositives

Appositives are nouns, noun phrases or clauses situated next to another noun to rename it or provide more information about it. Appositives allow students to add more detail to their sentences. Here are a few examples of an appositive in a simple sentence:

Liz Watson, **the Australian netball captain**, also plays wing attack for the Melbourne Vixens.

Anzac Day, **a national public holiday**, is a day of recognition for returning soldiers.

5. Common problems with sentences

Students can present sentences that appear to work within the context of the writing, but are actually incorrect. A couple of these common mistakes are **'fragments'** and **'run-on sentences'**.

5.1. Fragments

Fragments look like translation of speech (or thoughts) into writing. They begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark. They may look like sentences, but on closer inspection you will see they do not contain a subject or verb.

Fragments have their place in dialogue, letters, thoughts, and other informal composition, but they should not be used in formal writing.

Great! Awesome shoes. Where now? Too easy. Really?

5.2. Run-on sentences

Run-on sentences incorrectly run one independent clause into another. Let's look at the example below:

It is frightening you need to run away.

A way to fix this problem is to either separate the sentence into 2 independent clauses:

It is frightening! You need to run away.

Or you could include a coordinating conjunction and a comma:

It is frightening, and you need to run away.





6. How can simple sentences improve your writing?

Simple sentences provide an opportunity to be clear and concise and provide precision, or they can create impact. Different subject areas require specific types of simple sentences and, importantly, different 'parts of speech'. Here are a few examples of how simple sentences are used in three subject areas:

6.1. Science

In science writing, students generally ought to avoid adverbs or adjectives. Science writing needs nouns, noun groups and verbs to create precision in sentences. Sentences need specific details such as volume, measurement, data and figures.

The river depth of 40 metres was 20 metres from the shoreline.

The aim of this investigation was to determine the optimal concrete mix for a garden sculpture to withstand weathering and erosion.

6.2. English

Simple sentences work well when trying to create an impact in narrative writing. A simple sentence can provide an opportunity to alter the pace of the story and pivot the reader, or to offer a point of reflection.

'Call me Ishmael.' (Moby Dick – Herman Melville)

'He loved Big Brother.' (Nineteen Eighty-Four – George Orwell)

'On his death bed, the eighteenth-century haiku poet Shisui had finally responded to requests for a death poem by grabbing his brush, painting his poem, and dying.' (The Narrow Road to the Deep North – Richard Flanagan).

6.3. Health and physical education

In this subject, students are often required to recount information and to analyse sources. Simple sentences provide an opportunity to be specific about information. They focus on nouns, noun groups, and on non-finite verbs acting like nouns (these are called gerunds, underlined below).

Road safety is a big issue relevant to young people.

Protective behaviours include wearing a seatbelt and knowing the consequences of drink driving and speeding.

7. Suggestions for teaching sentences in the classroom

The following strategies are designed to be generic and are not specific to any subject area, genre or text. Teachers can adapt and tailor them to suit their programs.

7.1. Planning

Have a clear scope and sequence to map out when you are teaching sentences, to what year level, and in which subject area. Sentence activities can be built into your lessons and adapted to the subject and genre.

At the planning stage, you should consider and contextualise how simple sentences function in the type of text you are using in class. Regularly review your scope and sequence, to ensure simple sentence writing is embedded into your practice.

7.2. Lesson activities

7.2.1. Defining and teaching writing simple sentences

1. Present new learning
 - a. Define simple sentences and start with teaching syntax (see activity challenge on [page 13](#)).
 - b. Teach essential word groups such as noun, verb, adverb, and adjective.
 - c. Explain the types of words and why they are important in a sentence.
2. Introduce and explain the function of these essential words as part of a sentence (subject, verb, object).
 - a. Students practise word generation by generating lists based on the word groups.
3. Independent practice
 - a. Students practise writing sentences based on the lists of words they have created. Ask them to identify subject, verb, and objects in their sentences.
 - b. Monitor initial attempts and plan time for continual practice.
 - c. Students write 5 simple sentences about a key topic you are working on in class.





7.2.2. Explaining and demonstrating prepositional phrases

1. Present new learning
 - a. Explain and demonstrate the function of prepositional phrases.
2. Guided practice
 - a. Teach the structures using worked examples and guided practice.
 - b. Students write a simple sentence with a prepositional phrase.
3. Independent practice
 - a. Monitor initial practice attempts and plan time for continual practice until skills are automatic.
 - b. Provide correction and feedback.

7.2.3. Teaching simple sentences with embedded adjectival phrases

1. Present new learning
 - a. Explain and demonstrate the function of adjectival phrases.
2. Guided practice
 - a. Teach the structures using worked examples and guided practice.
3. Independent practice
 - a. Students create a simple sentence with an adjectival phrase embedded. For example, 'The main character, a crazy young platypus, was the star of the show.'
 - b. Monitor initial practice attempts and plan time for continual practice until skills are automatic.

7.2.4. Teaching simple sentences with noun phrases

1. Present new learning
 - a. Explain and demonstrate the function of noun phrases.
2. Guided practice
 - a. Teach the structures using worked examples and guided practice.
 - b. Provide correction and feedback.
3. Independent practice
 - a. Students create a simple sentence with a noun phrase. Monitor initial practice attempts and plan time for continual practice until skills are automatic.
 - b. Provide correction and feedback.

7.3. Other independent practice activities

Activity	Prompt	Example
Practice writing sentences targeting specific subjects and precise rules.	Write a simple sentence of at least 8 words	My favourite winter sport is rugby league, the game of champions.
	Write a simple sentence with a noun phrase.	My favourite winter sport is rugby union.
	Write a simple sentence with no 'object'.	Last night it rained.
	Write a simple sentence on a sport you enjoy.	The game of Aussie rules, at first sight, seems to be chaotic, with 36 players and up to 4 umpires running frantically around the ground.
	Practise writing 5 sentences on a key topic you are working on in class.	The Ku Klux Klan is an American white supremacist group that gained notoriety in the 20th Century.

8. Activity challenge – identifying syntax and sentence types

Read and consider the following sentence:

Based on knowledge from the rock cycle, the Year 8 task was to complete an in-class investigation into varying mixes of concrete and determine the perfect mix of aggregate, sand, and cement for a garden sculpture.

How many finite verbs are in this sentence?

Is it a simple, compound or complex sentence?

Let's break it down:

- Subject – **the Year 8 class** (noun or nominal group).
- Verb group – **was** (finite verb) **to complete** (infinitive).
- Object – **an in-class investigation into varying mixes of concrete and determine the perfect mix of aggregate, sand, and cement for a garden sculpture** (complex nominal group).

Answer: It is a simple sentence!

9. Appendices: Connecting to the Australian Curriculum and National Literacy Learning Progression

9.1. Appendix A: Relevant Australian Curriculum Content Descriptions

Alignment with the Australian Curriculum Content Descriptions (English)	
Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognise that sentences are key units for expressing ideas AC(EFLA05) Recognise that sentences are made up of groups of words that work together in particular ways to create meaning (AC9EFLA06)
Year 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand that a simple sentence consists of a single independent clause representing a single event or idea (AC9E1LA06) Understand that words can represent people, places and things (nouns including pronouns), happenings and states (verbs), qualities (adjectives) and details such as when, where and how (adverbs) (AC9E1LA07) Create and re-read to edit short written and/or multimodal texts to report on a topic, express an option or recount a real or imagined event, using grammatically correct simple sentences, some topic-specific vocabulary, sentence boundary punctuation and correct spelling of some one- and two-syllable words (AC9E1LY06)
Year 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand that in sentences nouns may be extended into noun groups using articles and adjectives, and verbs may be expressed as verb groups (AC9E2LA07) Create and edit short imaginative, informative and persuasive written and/or multimodal texts for familiar audiences, using text structure appropriate to purpose, simple and compound sentences, noun groups and verb groups, topic-specific vocabulary, simple punctuation and common 2-syllable words (AC9E2LY06)
Year 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand that a clause is a unit of grammar usually containing a subject and a verb that need to agree (AC9E3LA06) Understand how verbs represent different processes for doing, feeling, thinking, saying and relating (AC9E3LA07) Understand that verbs are anchored in time through tense (AC9E3LA08)
Year 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand how adverb groups/phrases and prepositional phrases work in different ways to provide circumstantial details about an activity (AC9E4LA08) Understand past, present and future tenses and their impact on meaning in a sentence (AC9E4LA09)
Year 5	Understand how noun groups can be expanded in a variety of ways to provide a fuller description of a person, place, thing or idea (AC9E5LA06)
Year 6	Understand how ideas can be expanded and sharpened through careful choice of verbs, elaborated tenses and a range of adverb groups (AC9E6LA06)
Year 7	Understand how consistency of tense through verbs and verb groups achieves clarity in sentences (AC9E7LA06)
Year 8	Understand the effect of nominalisation in texts (AC9E8LA06)
Year 9	Understand how abstract nouns and nominalisation can be used to summarise ideas in text (AC9E9LA06)
Year 10	Not identified at this stage/year level

9.2. Appendix B: Literacy Learning Progressions – Writing

Creating Texts	Grammar
CrT1 not identified at this stage/year level	Gra1 not identified at this stage/year level
CrT2 not identified at this stage/year level	Gra2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • writes sentence fragments or short, simple sentences using subject-verb and subject-verb-object structure (I play soccer) • uses regular plural nouns correctly (dog, dogs) • represents processes using a small range of verbs (relating verbs – is, are; action verbs – ran) • writes common prepositional phrases to indicate time and place (in the morning, to the shops)
CrT3 not identified at this stage/year level	Gra3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • writes coherent simple sentences to express an idea or event • uses pronouns to represent participants (she, we, them) • uses a small range of adjectives to build description in basic noun groups (the little dog) • uses common and proper nouns • uses single verbs or simple verb groups (they are playing) • uses predominantly simple present, continuous and past tense to represent processes (I play, I am playing, I played) • uses articles a, an and the with varying accuracy (a dog, a apple) • writes comprehensible sentences that contain some misuse of prepositions (mine is different than/then yours), pronouns (me and him went swimming) and adverbs (we walked quick)
CrT4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • writes one or more ideas which are not necessarily related, using sentence fragments (labels a drawing) • includes noun-verb agreement in sentence fragments • uses basic noun groups (my house) 	Gra4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • writes simple sentences correctly • uses simple adverbials to give details such as time, place and manner (in the afternoon, nearby, quickly) • uses simple present, past and future tenses accurately to represent processes • uses adjectives in noun groups to build more accurate descriptions of participants (the spotted dog) • writes simple and compound sentences correctly

Creating Texts	Grammar
<p>CrT5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uses adjectives to add meaning by describing qualities or features (red, small, long) • expresses feelings and opinions about people and things (nice) • uses logical word order in sentences 	<p>Gra5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uses a wide range of verbs and verb groups (uses thinking, feeling and perceiving verbs to represent inner processes; uses saying verbs to represent interaction) • employs a range of tenses to represent processes • uses adjectives in noun groups to include details of participants ('that crazy, little cattle dog') • uses articles accurately (a, an, the) • uses adverbials to present more surrounding details for time, place, manner and reason
<p>CrT6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • writes simple and compound sentences related to a topic using conjunctions (and, but, so, because, when) • maintains tense within a sentence • uses noun groups to develop ideas (new baby chicken) (see Grammar) • uses adverbs to give precise meaning to verbs (talking loudly) 	<p>Gra6</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • selects simple, compound and complex sentences to express and connect ideas, occasionally manipulating the structure for emphasis, clarity or effect • uses an extended range of verbs and verb groups for a particular effect (characterisation – howls, was trembling; and expressing causality – results in) • adjusts tense in a text if required (uses simple present tense to represent 'timeless' happenings (bears hibernate in winter) and uses continuous present tense when referring to an ongoing event (bears are becoming extinct)) • creates elaborated noun groups to build richer description by extending the noun group (that crazy, little cattle dog with the crooked tail that ran away last week) • uses adverbials to represent a greater range of circumstances (time – subsequently; place – in their environment; manner – excitedly; reason – due to several factors)

Creating Texts	Grammar
<p>CrT7</p> <p>maintains consistent tense within and between sentences</p>	<p>Gra7</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presents elaborated verb groups that capture nuances and complex expressions of time and probability (he was thought to have been arriving late; the errors could be attributed to faulty equipment) • selects from succinct noun groups through to highly elaborated noun groups for effect, clarity or complexity of description • uses nominalisations to create concise noun groups • intentionally uses a wide array of adverbials to represent a greater variety of circumstances (with whom? to what extent? how much? in what role? by what means? in what manner? compared to what?)
<p>CrT8</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uses present or timeless present tense consistently throughout text (bears hibernate in winter) • uses adjectives in noun groups to create more accurate description (its long, sticky tongue) • uses adjectives to persuade (dangerous) • uses simple modal verbs and adverbs (should, will, quickly) • uses adjectives in noun groups to create more accurate description (that crazy little cattle dog) • selects action verbs (jumped) and saying verbs (screamed) to affect the reader 	<p>not identified at this stage/year level</p>
<p>CrT9</p> <p>not identified at this stage/year level</p>	<p>not identified at this stage/year level</p>
<p>CrT10</p> <p>uses more elaborate noun groups that include classifying adjectives and specific nouns (mineral component of sedimentary rocks)</p>	<p>not identified at this stage/year level</p>
<p>CrT11</p> <p>not identified at this stage/year level</p>	<p>not identified at this stage/year level</p>

1 For example, nouns can be a 'person, place or thing' but also function as a subject or object in a sentence.

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