



Mastery of Writing

An Individualized Program



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MASTERY OF WRITING

Introduction

Mastery of Writing is a program which allows students to work at their own pace and on their weaknesses. Once the diagnostic test is graded, an individual lesson, which concentrates on one specific area, is then given to each and every student. Although there are no perfect rules for determining whether a student fully understands a concept, this diagnostic test may help. We recommend an 80% grade in each section for students to grasp the material [4 correct out of 5 or 8 correct out of 10]. Obviously, each teacher is free to set his or her own standards. Answer keys for each unit are supplied and work in conjunction with each section in order to facilitate scoring.

MASTERY OF WRITING

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Lesson One: Recognizing Clauses, Sentences, and Fragments *

* The material in this lesson is taken from Lesson Eleven in *Mastery of English Grammar and Mechanics*.

A *clause* is any group of words containing a subject and a predicate and joined together as a unit of thought. For this reason a prepositional phrase or a participial phrase is **not** a clause.

Ex. *For God, honor, and country* (prepositional phrase)
Running around the corner of the building (participial phrase)

Once you understand and recognize a clause, writing then becomes simply a matter of manipulating clauses to achieve the best effect for what you want to say. Since almost everything else in this unit requires that understanding, it is essential that you master this lesson before you go further.

1. A *main* or *independent clause* is a clause which can stand on its own as a complete sentence. It is a complete thought by itself.

Ex. *I like candy.*
Many people go to night school.
Mindy told Vinny a lie about his sister.

2. A *subordinate* or *dependent clause* is a clause that contains a subject and verb, but which cannot stand on its own as a complete sentence. It does not contain enough information and does not make sense by itself. A subordinate clause is introduced by a *subordinate conjunction*.

Ex. When the warm weather arrives,
If you don't believe me,

If you don't know the subordinate conjunctions already, memorize the following:

Common Subordinate Conjunctions

although	if	what
as	since	when
because	that	while
how	unless	whether

3. Any subordinate clause left to stand alone as a complete sentence is called a *sentence fragment*. It makes no sense on its own, and it must be connected to a main clause to become a *complete sentence*.

Ex. *After you leave.* (fragment)
After you leave, I'll do my homework. (sentence)

When the warm weather arrives. (fragment)
When the warm weather arrives, I will plant a garden. (sentence)

4. A sentence containing only one main clause is called a *simple sentence*.

Lesson Two: Recognizing and Correcting Sentence Fragments

A *sentence fragment* is a group of words that does not make complete sense as a sentence.

- Ex. 1. *running alongside the train*
2. *around the tip of the island bound for Java*
3. *Erickson and the rest of that dirty crew*
4. *billiards and ping pong are*

While we speak in sentence fragments all the time, we must avoid writing fragments. Sentence fragments set off “red warning lights” in a reader’s head; consequently, your ideas may not be given the weight they deserve.

To avoid or correct a sentence fragment, we must first be able to recognize one. Since a sentence is defined as a group of words with a subject and predicate expressing a complete thought, what is missing from the fragments above?

In #1, there is no subject or predicate. As written, it is a verbal phrase, which we could correct by adding a subject and predicate:

Ex. *The man was running alongside the train.*

Or if we wished, we could link it to another sentence:

Ex. *Running alongside the train, the man tripped and fell beneath the wheels.*

In #2, we have a similar problem. Who did what around the tip of the island? By adding a subject and predicate, we get this sentence:

Ex. *We sailed around the tip of the island bound for Java.*

In #3 we have a subject, *Erickson and crew*, but no predicate. What did *Erickson and crew* do? For it to be a sentence, we must add a predicate:

Ex. *Erickson and the rest of that dirty crew sneaked into the concert.*

In #4 we have a subject and predicate, but it is not a complete thought because it lacks a complement. As a sentence, it might read:

Ex. *Billiards and ping pong are examples of table games.*

Lesson Three: Correcting Run-on Sentences (The Comma Splice)

A *run-on sentence* occurs when the writer includes two independent clauses in one sentence and does not include the proper transition between them. In a fused or jammed sentence, the writer just puts the two clauses together.

Ex. *All of us went to the movies Jack and Joan did not stay long.*

Some writers recognize a problem with this, so they throw in a comma.

Ex. *All of us went to the movies, Jack and Joan did not stay long.*

But this “comma splice,” while it is a very common practice among student writers, does not correct the problem at all. What we have is still simply a longer fragment. Here are four ways in which the problem might be solved:

Make the two independent clauses into two sentences by adding a period.

Ex. *All of us went to the movies. Jack and Joan did not stay long.*

Keep the two independent clauses, but use a semi colon (;) to connect them.

Ex. *All of us went to the movies; Jack and Joan didn't stay long.*

Make a compound sentence by adding a coordinate conjunction.

Ex. *All of us went to the movies, but Jack and Joan did not stay long.*

Make a complex sentence with one independent clause and one dependent clause by adding a subordinate conjunction.

Ex. *Although all of us went to the movies, Jack and Joan did not stay long.*

Lesson Four: Emphasizing and Subordinating Ideas in a Sentence

When writing a sentence in which there are two ideas that you want to be equal, use two independent clauses.

Ex. *I knew the answer, but I wouldn't tell him that.*

However, when you want one idea to be stronger than the other, you should use a subordinate conjunction to introduce the subordinate clause (idea).

Ex. *Although I knew the answer, I wouldn't tell him.
I brought an umbrella because rain was forecast.
Since I was in the neighborhood, I stopped in to see you.*

You must understand that coordinate conjunctions link independent clauses. The coordinate conjunctions are:

and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet

Keep in mind that subordinate conjunctions link dependent clauses to independent clauses. The most common subordinate conjunctions are:

since	if	unless
although	as	while
because	when	where

The following pronouns are also used to join subordinate clauses to main clauses:

who	which	what
whom	whose	that

While these 15 words are not all the words that may be used as subordinate conjunctions, they are enough to get you started.

Punctuation Reminder: When the subordinate clause comes first in the sentence, a comma sets it off from the main clause. When a subordinate clause comes after the independent clause, no comma is required.

Ex. *Because it was raining, we took a cab.
We took a cab because it was raining.*

Lesson Five: Using Verbals for Sentence Variety

A *verbal* is a verb form used as some other part of speech. Unlike the prepositional phrase, which is introduced by a preposition, a verbal phrase is introduced by a verbal. A verbal phrase may take one of three forms.

The Infinitive Phrase: As you might expect, the *Infinitive Phrase* is introduced by an infinitive “to” plus a verb.

Ex. *to run, to explore, to buy, etc.*

Infinitive phrases are frequently used as nouns (subjects or objects of the verb), but may also be used as adjectives and adverbs.

Ex. *To run a marathon requires great endurance.* (Infinitive phrase as subject.)
He planned to rob a bank. (Infinitive phrase as object.)
He had three gifts to offer her. (Infinitive phrase as adjective.)
She was happy to travel in France. (Infinitive phrase as adverb.)

The Participial Phrase: The *Participial Phrase* is introduced by the verbal.

Ex. *Flying, skiing, worn, broken, stopped, leaned, etc.*

Participial phrases are used as adjectives.

Ex. *Skiing on powdered snow for the first time, Joe was unsure what to do.*

The Gerund Phrase: The *Gerund Phrase* is also introduced by a verbal.

Ex. *Running, worn, stopped, etc.*

Gerund phrases are used as nouns (subjects or objects of the verb).

Ex. *Running in marathons requires great endurance.* (Gerund phrase as subject.)
He loves running every day. (Gerund phrase as object.)

Using verbal phrases, particularly at the beginning of a sentence, can add variety and interest to your paragraphs. Unfortunately, many students rarely think about using these kinds of phrases, relying instead on dependent and independent clauses.

Note: Be sure your participial phrase is close to the word it modifies.

Wrong: *Puffing and breathing hard, the train pulled out without Joe.*

Right: *Puffing and breathing hard, Joe watched as the train pulled out without him.*

Punctuation Reminder: When the gerund phrase is used as the subject of the sentence, no comma is required.

Ex. *Running three miles a day is good exercise.*

When, however, the participial phrase begins the sentence, the participial phrase is set off from the main clause with a comma.

Ex. *Raising her voice slightly, the teacher told the boy to leave the room.*

Lesson Six: Verbs – Active Voice and Tense Shift

1. Whenever possible, avoid the passive voice and use the active voice. This makes your writing crisper, more lively, and more concise.

Passive Voice: *In the evening, I was taken to New York by my parents for my birthday.*

Active Voice: *For my birthday, my parents took me to New York in the evening.*

Be especially careful not to shift voice within a sentence.

Ex. *No one was seen by me, and I became afraid.*

Improved in active voice: *I saw no one, and I became afraid.*

2. The shifting of verb tense within a sentence or paragraph, however, is a more serious problem.

Ex. *Happy families are all happy in the same way, but unhappy families were unhappy in their own way.*

Note: In the above sentence, the writer shifted from present tense “are” to past tense “were.”

This a particularly irritating problem when relating a story. In this situation, the writer must decide if he or she is going to use the present tense or the past tense and then stick with it.

Of course, there are times when *it is necessary* to use two different tenses in the same sentence, so look at your verbs in context.

Ex. *He was here yesterday, but he isn't here today.*

Lesson Seven: Using Words Effectively

There are a few very simple ways in which most students can improve their writing. All it involves is keeping in mind these pitfalls.

1. Use short, concrete words, not polysyllabic or vague ones.

Vague: *His employment was terminated for failure to meet our standards for punctuality.*

Concrete: *He was fired for tardiness.*

This point frequently puts students in a bind. On the one hand, they are encouraged to use their vocabulary words in their writing and speaking, and it is good that they do so; however, it weakens their writing to use, for example, the phrase “monetary compensation” when the word “money” is usually more effective. Students **should** experiment and use their vocabulary words as often as possible in writing and speaking, but in a final draft of any writing you should use concrete words in place of vague ones. It is the concrete words that create images in the mind of the reader. Specific details are those that will be remembered.

Vague

In proportion to the manner in which the customs and amusements of a country are cruel and barbarous, so the punishment of its penal code will be severe.

Concrete

The ancient Romans, who delighted when gladiators died in combat with wild lions or bulls, also hanged and burned their criminals.

2. Avoid excessive use of adjectives and adverbs; instead, make strong nouns and verbs work for you. Mistakenly, some students think that descriptive writing involves stringing numerous adjectives together.

Relies on adjectives rather than nouns and verbs: *It was a gray, cold, snowy winter’s day and a bitterly cold wind that turned our noses red and rosy also turned our warm, toasty bodies feel cold and stiff.*

Relies on strong nouns and verbs: *The snowflakes swirled around as the wind froze our noses and knifed through our thin jackets, chilling us to the bone.*

3. Omit unnecessary words and expressions. Strong, forceful writing is usually brief and doesn’t carry unnecessary baggage.

Words as excess baggage

Too wordy: *Due to the fact that we were somewhat late for class, Mr. Jackson, who is our English teacher, decided to give all of us a detention.*

Better: *Because we walked in after the bell, Mr. Jackson, our English teacher, gave us a detention.*