

## Grammar Through Games from *Helping Kids Write*

Understanding verbs is an integral part of understanding how a sentence is put together. Once students understand what a verb is, the number of fragments and run-on sentences in their writing often decreases dramatically. One can easily provide the essential parts of verb study for middle school on one photocopied page. For example:

Supply verbs for the sentences below:

Janet \_\_\_\_\_the garage door.

The flag \_\_\_\_\_in the wind.

Joe \_\_\_\_\_a little dog.

Where \_\_\_\_\_the erasers?

There are two main types of verbs: action and being. Those that tell what somebody or something does, did, or will do, and those that tell what something or somebody is, was, or will be.

The robin hopped across the grass.

Susan sits in the back row.

John is at home.

Explain why these are verbs.

### Verb Finder

When you want to find out whether a word can be a verb, try this Finder. Use I, you, he, she, or it, before the word you are checking. If the combination makes a sensible sentence and sounds right to you, the word is probably a verb.

Notice:

I window she windows you window it windows

I apple he apples you apple it apples

You can see that window and apple couldn't be verbs because they don't make sense.

Use the Verb Finder on these words:

easily	red	here	bread
from	ask	hear	taste
go	write	high	peanut
candy	grass	hot	along

Remember that the Verb Finder can be tried only with the word before the word itself. In other words, "I easily did something," can't be allowed because it might sound like "easily" was a verb when in fact it is not. "I easily" alone doesn't sound right.

Find the verb in these sentences using your Verb Finder.

Daisies blossom along the banks.

The earth is soft and muddy.

Trees turn green overnight.

Winds rage furiously.

Lightning flashes across the sky.

More practice, on a continuing basis, through games and discussion, helps to make this concept stick. Gradually, children will get to the point when a word will leap out of the sentence as a verb. The Verb Finder system works well. Verb Finder, obviously, is only a simpler term for conjugation of verbs. The only addition to this method might be a list of common helping verbs (be, being, etc.) that would not work with the Verb Finder, but are verbs as well.

### Sentence Ghost

This game can be played either with an entire class or only a few students. Start anywhere in the room, with one person giving a word which could begin a sentence. The next person adds another word to that word, thinking of her own sentence. The teacher or leader writes down the words as they are said. Two words do not make a sentence in this game, although legally "It is" is a sentence. The game continues until the sentence has been ended. The person who ends the sentence should say nothing upon finishing it, as the next person must say

that the sentence has been ended or he, too, gets penalized. The person who ends the sentence, even though it might be inevitable, gets a “P,” or suitable penalty. The next player may also get penalized if she does not recognize that the sentence has been completed. If the sentence starts to appear confused, a player may challenge the person before him to say what sentence he had in mind. If he did not have one in mind, he gets a penalty.

This game is excellent for work on sentence structure. Throughout the game there can be a lot of discussion about what makes a sentence, why the sentence hasn't ended, etc. Unlike many classroom games, it demands the active participation of everyone all the time. Otherwise players lose, not realizing what has come before them. Encourage the class to be creative in their choice of words. Some of the silliest sentences ever written have come from Sentence Ghost. But they *are* sentences!

### Sentence Mix-Up

This game encourages an awareness of sentence structure and can be played successfully in groups of three or four. Write ten words on the board. They should be interesting, though unconnected to each other. Give the class a set time limit, and ask them to construct a coherent sentence around them. The team that constructs the best sentence the fastest gets a point, a candy, a chance to empty the garbage, whatever. When groups end up with run-on sentences or fragments, it is a good time to discuss what makes a sentence incomplete or run-on. They also cannot win if the sentence itself is not correctly structured.

An example of a successful sentence follows:

jewelry	shattering	ruffled
hurtled	dashing	rain
coffee	clumsy	hippopotamus

Dashing through the rain, the clumsy hippopotamus tripped and was hurtled through the jewelry store window, shattering the porcelain coffee cups and scaring the ruffled salesman.

### Grammar Whoopee

This game can be played when the class has been working either with all parts of speech or only a few concepts. The class can be divided into groups, or students can work individually. It often works better in

groups, if they are well chosen, since the stronger students help the others. Example (Sentence written on the board by the teacher. Be as inventive as possible.):  
*The green greasy monster ate spaghetti and slime for breakfast and loved it.*

I often introduce specific parts of speech in class in a lecture manner as a brief prelude to playing a game during a class period. In this way instruction has an immediate and specific goal. Depending upon what stage your class is in learning parts of speech, you might ask students to find only verbs and nouns, or the subject of the sentence, or adjectives, or direct objects. As much or as little direction can be included in the original instructions as you think appropriate to the group.

Scoring can be done with minus points for wrong answers or one point for each correct answer. Depending upon the ability of the group, I have told the class when they are right or wrong in their answers. If the class is quite skilled, however, leave it to them to catch their own errors.

Immediate explanations about why the answers are or are not correct often result in good learning. It is important, however, to organize the game so that the quicker students don't control it. Ways of avoiding this are to have everyone in the group work separately until all are finished, and then collaborate on answers. (Here everyone attempts the problem, not waiting for the more able to do it for them.) Or give credit for those first finished, but ask the class to wait until all the answers have been completed. Since no credit is given unless everything in an answer is right, it is often the group or student who has worked carefully who gets the point anyway. Sometimes one ends up returning to the original players if the sentence is still not correct. Essentially, the game is group sentence diagramming and involves everyone in a learning process that is, in fact, sufficient to reinforce grammar concepts.

### Sentence Coding

This game can be played in much the same way as the games above—either in groups or individually. It is best played when the basic parts of speech have been explained and worked on for a while. However, incorrect and correct answers with explanation provide excellent practice and further understanding.

**Example: Write on the board:**

Adjective, Noun, Verb, Adverb,  
Prepositional Phrase

The class is asked to replace quickly the parts of speech labels with actual words. A simpler form might be:

Adjective, Noun (subject), Verb, Adjective,  
Noun (direct object).

**Sample answers:**

The sly fox crept silently into the henhouse.  
Old people hate noisy children.

The class itself provides the time limit—the first finished writing is the first to have a turn. But if a mistake is made, a minus point is given and the next fastest gets a try at the sentence. The game can be varied depending upon the ability and skills of the class.

**Categories**

Categories is a game which can be played for days, off and on. Although it is not a grammar game, it is an excellent vocabulary builder, and fun besides. The set-up is as follows, to be copied from the board and filled in.

	P	L	U	M	S
mammals					
cities					
books					
fruit					
tools					
birds					
countries					

Both the letters at the top and the categories at the side may be changed every time the game is played. Scoring the game is as follows: A player starts with a category, reading his choice of word to fill in the box. The word must be one which is a member of that category and which begins with the letter of the box. If the word is correct, he gets one point for every player in the game that did *not* have that word in his box as well. Varying

the actual categories helps children to use their own strengths of information and not get discouraged.

Many grammar, vocabulary, and spelling games are possible and greatly enjoyable for middle school children. Competition in all of these games is really at a minimum. It is the speed and the laughing that occurs along the way that makes grammar games appealing for kids. There is no hard rule that dictates that English classes must be serious and dull in order to stem the tide of illiteracy in the United States. More games and suggestions can be found in *Games to Improve Your Child's English\**, which seems to be the definitive book on English games. Though the book was designed for parents to use at home with their children, many of the games work as effectively in a classroom setting. The teaching of grammar, however, must remain secondary to the writing that goes on continuously in and outside a middle-school classroom.

*Helping Kids Write*, available from Educators Publishing Service.

**References**

\* Abraham B. Hurwitz and Arthur Goddard, *Games to Improve Your Child's English* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970).