



Family and Tutor Toolkit: Syntax

RIDE Literacy Learning Lab for Dyslexia,
Dysgraphia, and Dyscalculia

To access the full recording with Dr. Margie Gillis [click here](#).

What is this kit for?

This kit helps your child understand how sentences work so that they can build their oral language (speaking), writing skills and reading comprehension. By practicing syntax (how sentences are built), your child will:

- Be able to form full sentences and understand the types and functions of words that make up complete thoughts
- Vary their sentence structure in writing
- Understand how to make sentences stronger

What is Syntax?

Syntax is how words are put together to form sentences. It is one part of grammar. This includes how parts of a sentence are arranged and how they work together to contribute to meaning. Focusing on syntax is important because:

- Sentences are what are described as the “worker bees” of text
- Syntax is different based on the format! The language we use when we speak (oral language) is different than the language in books and in writing. Understanding how syntax changes and how it looks different in books is important.

How can I support syntax at home?

Read these family-friendly exercises, adapted from *The Comprehension Blueprint* (Hennessey, 2020).

Talk Through Sentences 	When reading, pause and ask, “What does this sentence mean?” or “Who is this about?” to help your child build understanding.
Use Pictures 	Look at a picture together, which could be from a book or could be a photo. Identify who or what (noun) is happening (verb). Use adjectives to describe the picture. Then, create a sentence based on the picture. If your child is up for it, write that sentence down!
Fix the Sentence 	Practice fixing and building sentences: Play with sentences by combining them, rearranging them, or fixing ones that don’t make sense to strengthen understanding.
Build a Bigger Sentence 	Start simple and add on! Say each version out loud so they hear how meaning grows and discuss how the meaning changes. You can also do this by telling a story that gets progressively longer. Example: Start: The dog barked. Add <i>where</i>: The dog barked <i>in the yard</i>. Add <i>when</i>: The dog barked in the yard <i>at night</i>.
Unscramble the Sentence 	Write or say a mixed up sentence and have your child fix it. If writing, use note cards or a paper cut up so that the child can put it back in the correct order. Then, discuss each word and how it helps you understand the meaning of the sentence. ex.) Mixed up sentence example: barks the dog at cat the (The dog barks at the cat.) <i>Note: While it’s fine to name the part of speech (ie., noun), it’s even more important to discuss the job the word is doing in the sentence.</i>
Study a sentence 	Identify a sentence from a book the child is reading to “study.” Read it to or with the child. Break it into chunks and discuss each part of what it means.
Ask the W questions! 	When children are reading, writing or speaking, ask them to expand their thoughts with the “W” questions, such as: • Who or what? [noun] • What were they doing? [verb] • Which one, how many, what kind? [adjective] • When, where, how or why? [adverb]
Say it, Then Write It 	Say a sentence aloud and then write it down!

How can I support syntax at home?

Caregiver Tips for Success

Focus on meaning, not rules: Instead of worrying about grammar terms, help your child understand what the sentence is saying and how the words work together.

Help connect ideas: Remind your child that each sentence adds a new piece of meaning, and together they build the full understanding of a text.

Support reading, writing and discussion: Understanding how sentences work helps children not only read better, but also express their ideas more clearly in writing and when speaking.

Keep it quick: Syntax practice can be bite-sized and spread out throughout the day. Practice one sentence at a time. Practice can be oral (discussing sentences and words), written, or through reading.

How can I support students I am tutoring with syntax?

When tutoring students, the goal is to help them with sentence-level work. Simple activities you can to support this include:

- Reading through their written work and choosing one sentence to revise to make them stronger OR
- Identifying one sentence from the text you are reading that uses a more challenging sentence structure and “unpacking” it to discuss what each part means.

While there are many strategies to support syntax instruction, here are four key practices that are easy to implement in a tutoring model:

- [Sentence Expansion](#) (Keys to Literacy)
- [Sentence Deconstruction](#) (Keys to Literacy)
- [Juicy Sentence protocol](#) (Student Achievement Partners)
- [Mentor Sentence Protocol](#) (ELA Guidebooks)
- [Language Dives](#) (EL)

Syntax work should follow these steps

(which can be applied across content areas and grade levels):

1. Identify a sentence that has a complex sentence structure.
2. Decide on which strategy you want to use to teach syntax.
3. Engage in the strategy with students.
4. Have them apply their learning by practicing the skill they learned in writing.

Tips and Tricks for Tutoring

- Follow the guidance of the HQCM to support sentence work, which supports coherence between the work you are doing and what students receive in the classroom. Syntax work can be called by many names (such as Mentor Sentences, Juicy Sentence, Language Dive, etc.) so it's imperative to be familiar with these materials so you can follow the same procedure learned in the classroom
- Keep syntax work short and sweet. Focus on using one sentence at a time.
- Remember to focus on meaning, not only form! (for example, identify the noun and then discuss what question it is answering in the sentence, such as who or what).