Use Dependent Clauses to Vary Sentence Structure

Objectives

In this mini-lesson, students will:

- Learn how to vary sentence structure by using dependent clauses.
- Practice varying sentence structure by using dependent clauses.
- Discuss how they can apply this strategy to their independent writing.

Preparation

Materials Needed

- Chart paper and markers
- Interactive whiteboard resources

Advanced Preparation

If you will not be using the interactive whiteboard resources, copy the modeling and practice texts onto chart paper prior to the mini-lesson. If necessary, write the sentence frames from “Strategies to Support ELs” on chart paper.

1. Focus

Explain Using Dependent Clauses to Vary Sentence Structure

Say: To engage readers, writers must vary their sentences. You can vary sentences by starting with different words or writing sentences of different lengths. Another way to vary sentences is to write more complex sentences using dependent clauses. A simple sentence often includes a subject, a verb, and (usually) a direct object. For example: “Lisa (subject) fed (verb) the dog (direct object).” A complex sentence will include a simple sentence plus a dependent clause (the simple sentence in this case is usually called an independent clause). A dependent clause has a subject and verb, but it depends on the rest of the sentence—it does not make sense without the rest of the sentence. Here is a complex sentence: “After she ate breakfast, Lisa fed the dog.” (Display the sentence on chart paper or using the interactive whiteboard resources.) The clause “After she ate breakfast” is the dependent clause. Although it adds detail to the sentence, it makes no sense on its own—if I read only this, I don’t know what happened after she ate breakfast. Today I’m going to show you how to vary your sentences by using dependent clauses.

Model Using Dependent Clauses to Vary Sentence Structure

Display the modeling text on chart paper or using the interactive whiteboard resources. Ask students to listen for the dependent clause as you read the sentence from “Sojourner Truth” aloud.

Even after the war ended in 1865 and slavery was abolished, Sojourner continued to speak and travel around the country.

Modeling Text

Say: The dependent clause in this sentence is “even after the war ended in 1865 and slavery was abolished.” This sentence part does not stand on its own. If I read only this, I don’t know what happened after the war ended and slavery was abolished. So this clause depends on the rest of the sentence to complete an idea. The rest of the sentence could stand on its own as a complete sentence, but it gains information from the dependent clause that comes before it. And I see that the writer could have written this as short sentences: “The war ended in 1865. Slavery was abolished. Sojourner continued to speak and travel around the country.” By making this a complex sentence, however, the writer connected related ideas and created a longer sentence to help her vary her sentence lengths. I can see how using sentences with dependent clauses helps a writer vary sentence structure. In a biography, this can help a writer add detail to a
sentence, such as in this example, where the writer uses the dependent clause to tell what was happening in the world during a certain period of Sojourner Truth’s life.

2. Rehearse

Practice Using Dependent Clauses to Vary Sentence Structure

Display the practice text on chart paper or using the interactive whiteboard resources. Explain that this text might be part of a biography about Sojourner Truth and it could be improved by changing some sentences to dependent clauses to vary the sentence structure.

Sojourner Truth gave speeches. People listened. The Fifteenth Amendment passed. After this, black men could vote. Sojourner’s speeches had helped this happen.

Practice Text

Ask students to work with partners to revise the sentences so that they include at least one dependent clause. Remind students that a dependent clause is a sentence fragment; it has a subject and verb, but it can’t stand on its own. If necessary, provide an example of a rewritten sentence. (For example: “When Sojourner Truth gave speeches, people listened.”) Ask pairs to write sentences and be ready to explain how their additions of a dependent clause improved the text.

Share Practice Sentences

Bring students together and invite partners to read aloud their sentences and explain their revisions. Record students’ sentences and post these as models for students to use as they draft or revise their biographies.

3. Independent Writing and Conferring

Say: We learned that we can vary sentence structure by using dependent clauses. Using dependent clauses allows us to add interesting information to our sentences. As you draft and revise your biographies, remember to use dependent clauses to make your sentences more varied and informative.

Encourage students to focus on varying their sentence structures by using dependent clauses during independent writing time. During student conferences, reinforce students’ use of this and other strategies using the prompts on your conferring flip chart.

4. Share

Bring students together. Invite volunteers to share examples of sentences they revised by using dependent clauses.

Strategies to Support ELs

Beginning
While other students complete the partner practice activity, work with beginning ELs to practice common questions and answers they will use in oral conversations. Invite students to talk with you or with a partner. Provide the following questions and sentence frames:

- What is your name?/My name is ______.
- How old are you?/I am ______.
- How are you?/I am fine. How are you?

Intermediate and Advanced
Pair ELs with fluent English speakers during the partner activity.

All Levels
If you have ELs whose first language is Spanish, share these English/Spanish cognates: structure/la estructura; vary/variar.