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Syntax: Phrase Structure and Argument Structure

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Introduction

Language structure has layers like a layer cake. Each language layer contains unique ingredients and features. Syntax (*syn* = together + *tassein* = to arrange) is the layer of language containing rules and patterns for how words are arranged and used in sentences. The purpose of this article is to help educators understand the place of syntax in language arts instruction. Models for instruction are shared throughout.

In this article we explore syntax by:

- Describing how young children acquire language by learning words and rules.
- Introducing syntactic categories, beginning with nouns and verbs, and building bare-bones sentences.
- Introducing phrase structure using adjectives and adverbs to build basic noun and verb phrases and introducing intra- and inter-phrasal rules.
- Exploring the difference between semantics and syntax.
- Investigating how prepositional phrases are used to expand both noun and verb phrases.
- Introducing argument structure as an alternate way of thinking about syntax based on how the main verb(s) assign roles.

Syntactical ability is important because it is strongly correlated with reading comprehension and with higher-level academic achievement (Carlisle, 2002; Deacon & Keffer, 2018; Moats, 2020). Syntactic ability at grade 3 strongly predicts reading comprehension in grade 4, and reading with prosody correlates with reading comprehension in young and older students (Breen, 2025).

The common way to think of English syntax is through the framework of phrase structure starting with noun phrase + verb phrase = sentence (NP + VP = S). Understanding phrase structure is helpful for instruction targeting oral reading prosody, text comprehension, and written expression.

A second way of thinking about syntax is through the framework of argument structure. With argument structure the verb is the boss. Verbs assign roles through mandatory and optional questions they raise, such as done by who or what, or done to whom or what? A sentence is complete when mandatory questions are answered. Knowledge of argument structure is useful when teaching comprehension, especially when constructing the meaning of complex text.

Curious Question

What are some commonplace words that have been invented?

Early Oral Language Development: Words and Rules

Children are born with the ability to naturally learn to speak and listen. Within a short amount of time, with little to no direct instruction, they develop the ability to classify words by grammatical function and syntactic use that is adult-like by age five (Chomsky, 1964; Carlisle, 2002). Pinker (1994) titled his first book, *The Language Instinct*. In his next book, *Words and Rules*, Pinker (1999) argues that words and rules are the two ingredients of language. Initially, infants try out their speech ‘sound-system’ by babbling, relying on imitation and exploration. Then, around age one, they begin uttering single words. These single words may carry larger meaning. If your one-year-old says, “Shoe,” they may mean, “Put my shoes on and let’s walk the dog.” If they scream, “Shoe!” They mean, “Now!” After single words come two-word utterances. One day my one-and-a-half year old son, Bernard, out of the blue, said, “Big truck.” He did not say, “Truck big.” He knew and applied words and rules. According to Pinker, there is no three-word utterance stage. Instead, toddlers come to the “all hell breaks loose” stage (Pinker, 1994, p. 273).

Children who lag in their syntactical development later can struggle with comprehension. Van Dyke found that difficulty with syntax was persistent in children with Developmental Language Difference (DLD). Van Dyke notes, “Synthetic structures are built incrementally and can be revised incrementally as more information comes in. Individuals with poor syntactic knowledge build incorrect interpretations and have difficulty revising them” (2025, p. 29). Understanding the place of syntax in instruction is crucial for students with DLD, and for all students navigating the complex syntax they encounter in literature and content text.

Syntactic Categories

We begin with the basic elements of syntax – the eight parts of speech. Eberhardt and Gillis (2025) call them “grammatical building blocks.” Parts of speech, like noun and verb, name syntactic categories or “slots” in a sentence framework. Noun and verb slots reflect two basic aspects of reality. At an elemental level, things exist and things change. The **who or what** that exists is the noun. The action, change, or **did what**, is the verb. An elemental, bare-bones sentence follows this N + V = S pattern. **Babies babble. Bert barks.** The other six syntactic categories are adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, and interjections. These are taught in a similar manner, tying each to the question being answered. The big idea is that parts of speech combine in specific, rule-based ways (Van Dyke, 2025). Determiners point out or point toward a noun.

Determiners are necessary parts of the noun phrase that tell which one, how many, or whose (Moats & Rosow, 2023, p 37).

Determiner	Determiner’s Role
A penguin ate the pizza.	Any single penguin, not identified.
That penguin ate the pizza.	A specific penguin over there.
Those penguins ate the pizza.	Several penguins over there.
These penguins ate the pizza.	Several penguins close by.

Phrase Structure

Phrases can take the place of a single word within a sentence frame. A phrase consists of two or more words doing the job of a single syntactic category/part of speech. The underlined words below do the job of a noun.

Audrey found the puppy. A purple penguin found the puppy.

Adjectives answer the questions which one (a - determiner), how many (also -a) or what kind (purple). We use adjectives within noun phrases that end with a noun as the head of the phrase.

those **three** **blind mice**

NP = Adj/Det + Adj/Numb + Adj + N

Moving to the verb side of the sentence, we answer the question, did what? These mice run. To build a simple verb phrase, add an adverb that tells how, such as frantically. We now have a recipe for a simple verb phrase (VP), doing the job of a verb:

run frantically **frantically run**

VP = V + Adv or VP = Adv + V

When we put it all together, NP + VP, we get this simple sentence recipe:

1. **Those three blind mice run frantically.**

Det + Adj + Adj. + N + V + Adv

or

2. **Those three blind mice frantically run.**

Det + Adj + Adj + N + Adv + V

Which version do you like? I like the rhythm in 2 ('frantically' reads like a triplet). Language is generative. Words and rules combine to create a playground for word play with room for variation and inspiration. Following basic phrase structure and sentence structure rules, a writer can generate all kinds of different sentences. Try it out. Following this recipe above, on the fly, make up five of your own sentences.

Phrases have specific jobs. They work for a living. A noun phrase functions as a noun telling **who**, **whom** or **what**. An adverbial phrase answers **how**, and it can also tell **where**, **when**, and **why** an action occurred. The job of a phrase is to answer a question, acting as a part of speech.

Syntax is Distinct from Semantics

You can follow the same recipe as above and create a meaningless sentence that sounds right.

That lone square peanut flies largely.

Det + Adj + Adj + N + V + Adv

Lewis Carroll’s Jabberwocky combines syntax that sounds right with wacky semantics.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.

– Lewis Carroll (1871)

We can also have syntactically correct or incorrect nonsense, such as:

Fluorescent pickles sang by the avocados.

Pickles sang by fluorescent the avocados.

These examples demonstrate that syntax is a distinct layer of language structure. We can create an infinite number of sentences, using the eight parts of speech as ingredients and following a simple set of phrase and sentence structure rules. A sentence can follow the rules of syntax and still be meaningless and entertaining, and this nonsense can be syntactically correct or incorrect.

A key takeaway: Even though syntax is a distinct layer of language structure from semantics or meaning, syntax and semantics are woven together in how we process language to arrive at meaning. That is why two recent issues of IDA Perspectives (Winter, 2024, and Spring, 2025) share the heading, *Syntax Comes First: Understanding how Syntax is the Backbone of Comprehension*.

Instruction: Usage (Parts of Speech) and Phrase Structure

Here, and in subsequent sections of this article, are techniques for teaching syntax that I have found to be engaging and effective. Most come from *Spellography*, a word study curriculum (Moats & Rosow, 2024), or the *Speech to Print Workbook* (Moats & Rosow, 2020). Additional resources can be found in the Guide to Syntax and Language Comprehension Resources in the IDA’s second *Perspectives* issue of *Syntax Comes First*.

1. Identifying the Questions That Words Answer

A functional approach to teaching syntax is based on students identifying questions that words or phrases answer within a sentence (Moats, 2020). Identifying these questions helps students clarify the use of labels such as noun, adjective, verb, and adverb, and questioning helps students get at the meaning. It can be fun to use anagrams and simple sentence frames to ground this functional approach (Green & Enfield, 1997). Examples start with nouns and verbs forming bare-bones sentences and extend to a 5-slot form, adding adjectives and adverbs to build noun and verb phrases.

“Explain that usage” refers to how a word is used in a sentence or a job that a word or a phrase is doing to answer a question. For example, **nouns** answer *who* or *what*.

Exercise: Unscramble the anagram below and place the words in order into the sentence frame. Then write the question that the word answers.

moo cows musically brown

Parts of Speech	Adjective	Noun	Verb	Adverb
Sentence	Brown	cows	moo	musically
Question	What kind?	Who or what?	Did what?	How?

(*Musically moo* is also possible. If a student solves it that way I say, “Good job,” and then steer (ahem) them to put the verb first – *moo musically* – aligned to add the questions together.)

2. Sentence Robots

To make a robot that builds sentences, start using a 2-Slot Robot.

Noun + Verb = Sentence.

- Write 2-Slot sentences using this noun and verb word box. Add words of your own.

Slot 1: Noun = Who or what?	Slot 2: Verb = Did what?
chickens, pigs, sheep, ducks, cows, dogs...	cluck, oink, quack, moo, snort, bark...
2-Slot Sentences: Chickens cluck. Sheep quack. ... (Silly sentences are ok.)	

- 4-slot Robot: Use one word per slot and build a few sentences. Your sentences can be serious or silly.

Adjective	Noun	Verb	Adverb
chubby, lonely, spunky, slinky, pesky	penguins, wolves, babies, lizards, flies	waddle, howl, burp, stomp, slither, buzz	slowly, sadly, loudly, rapidly, artfully, horribly
Chubby	penguins	waddle	slowly
Lonely	lizards	burp	horribly

What questions do the adjective and adverb answer?

Parts of Speech	Question
Adjective	What kind?
Adverb	How?

3. Parts of Speech Question Sort

- In the table below, write the questions that are answered by each part of speech.

Question Bin
Who? What kind? How? What? Did what? Which one? How many?

Adjective	Noun	Verb	Adverb
What kind? Which one? How many?	Who? What?	Did what?	How?

4. Sentence Anagrams (from Spellography, Book A, (2024) p. 196)

Unscramble the sentence anagrams below. Notice how the words fit based on the job or part of speech.

- silently slinky slurp insects snakes
- landing talented skillfully sticks Tara the

<i>The tiny</i>	<i>mouse</i>	<i>hungrily</i>	<i>gnawed</i>	<i>the cheese.</i>
Adj What Kind? Which one?	N - Doer Who? What?	Adv How?	V Did what?	N - Done to Whom? What?
<i>Slinky</i>	<i>snakes</i>	<i>silently</i>	<i>slurp</i>	<i>insects.</i>
<i>Talented</i>	<i>Tara</i>	<i>skillfully</i>	<i>sticks</i>	<i>the landing.</i>

Intra- and Inter-phrasal Rules:

Phrases follow intra- (inside) and inter- (between) phrasal rules and patterns. An example of an intra-phrasal rule is the order of adjectives. We say, “three, blind mice,” not, “blind, three mice.”

Solve this anagram: **red the balloon big**

What is the rule? Did you need to state the rule to use it, or did you find the solution that just sounded correct? Solution: ***The big red balloon***

The rule is called the Royal Order. First, use a determiner, then opinions, then facts in a prescribed order. Size comes before color. Native speakers learn the rules implicitly early in development. It is far more effortful for ELL students to explicitly learn the rule to follow it.

At an inter-phrasal level we say, “mice are nice,” not, “mice is nice,” or, “mouse are nice.” Tense, possession and number are three constructs that must align within and between phrases.

Prepositional Phrase

In our basic model of phrase structure, a sentence has two main parts, a noun phrase and a verb phrase. Writers can expand a sentence by adding to the NP or VP using a third common phrase type, the prepositional phrase (PP). A PP begins with a preposition (**pre** = before + position) and ends with a noun or NP. Prepositions are words that tell where, after the farmer's wife, or when, after the farmer's wife cut off their tails, or show logical relations such as causation, because she collects tails.

PPs are versatile. They can link to or modify the NP or the VP. For example, the PP, ***on the counter***, can be used as an adjective, modifying the noun by telling where the mice can be found:

Those blind mice on the counter

NP = Det + Adj + N + PP-where

Or, the PP, on the counter, may link instead to the VP as an adverb telling where mice ran:

ran frantically on the counter

VP = V + Adv-how + PP-where

In summary, a PP tells when, where, or in what relation. It can be used as an Adj to modify the N or an Adv to modify the V.

The Clause: It Depends

A clause is different from a phrase. A clause contains both a noun subject and its verb. There are two types of clauses (aside from Santa). One is independent, able to stand alone as a complete sentence. One is dependent and not a complete sentence because it is not a complete thought. Something is left hanging.

A dependent clause cannot stand alone. It is used to add information to the independent clause. For example, prepositions telling when act as subordinating conjunctions. Conjunctions are fittings, like elbows and couplings, that join words, phrases, and clauses together. There are two types of conjunctions.

coordinating (**co-** = together/with + **ordo** = order)
subordinating (**sub-** = below/under + **ordo** = order)

Prepositions can act as subordinating conjunctions to change the independent clause, **Bunky barked**, into a dependent clause, **after Bunky barked**. Other subordinating conjunctions signal relationships, including causation (**because**), conditions (**if**), and concession (**though**). Unfettered use of subordinating conjunctions leads to sentence fragments. If we had a nickel for every time a student started their answer with because, instead of restating the question in their answer, we could fund public education!

Instruction: At the Sentence Level Using Phrases and Clauses

“I really do not know that anything had ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences” (Gertrude Stein, 1934, *Lectures in America*).

“Merely learning to identify syntactical elements and explain their function is probably not enough; rather, students need to explore the internal structure of sentences by creating, combining, and expanding them” (Carlisle, 2002, p. 127).

1. Establish Language to Analyze Sentence Structure

Once students learn phrase and clause types, they have terms and concepts to analyze the internal structure of sentences. I post this simple chart, ready-to-hand, for students to use when analyzing different types of sentences, sentence fragments, and run-ons.

Phrase	Clause
Noun phrase	Independent
Verb phrase	Dependent
PP: Adj PP / Adv PP	

Here are prompting questions I use when analyzing a parsed section of text:

Is it a phrase or a clause?

If it is a phrase, what kind of phrase? What question does it answer?

If it is a clause, is it independent or dependent?

2. Sentence Expansion with Prepositional Phrases

In the exercises below, students explore the use of PP through sentence manipulation. They start writing bare-bones sentences, then expand those sentences using PP, sentence combining, and conjunctions.

A. Two-Slot Sentences: A two-slot sentence is bare-bones, N + V = S.

Start with a two-slot sentence.

Next, add prepositional phrases (PP) to write longer, more informative sentences.

Bold the PP when it tells about the noun *flies*.

Underline the PP when it tells about the verb *bite*.

Type	Example
2-Slot: Noun + Verb = Sentence	Flies bite.
Prepositional Phrases (PP): (Preposition + (Adjectives) + Noun)	after school with gusto under the mangy moose by the plastic pink flamingo

Versatile PP can join the NP or the VP:

Flies under the mangy moose bite. Flies by the plastic pink flamingo bite.

Flies bite, under the mangy moose. Flies bite by the plastic pink flamingo.

Mobility of adverbial PP (predicate expanders):

After school, flies under the mangy moose bite with gusto.

Flies under the mangy moose bite with gusto after school.

B. Proposition to Preposition: Use the preposition bin below to write and add prepositional phrases to expand the sentence at each X.

Preposition Bin

*after, until, from, with, in, on, by, to, through, throughout, over, before, between,
under, along, across, behind, up, at, into, against, among, towards, upon, for...*

Examples:

a. *Her buckskin boots X tracked quietly X.*

Her buckskin boots X (with the leather straps) tracked quietly X (through the mud).

b. *Skunks X strut X silently.*

Skunks X (near the tree stump) strut X (past the porch railing) silently.

3. Sentence Parsing

Parsing sentences is an important exercise that mimics what we want readers to do as they read. "A teacher's ability to notice incorrect phrasing can provide powerful feedback for the student" (Van Dyke, 2025. p. 8). The previous exercise in sentence expansion is one side of this parsing coin. Parsing longer sentences into chunks is the other side. Parsing sentences helps students become aware of the role of determiners, conjunctions, and prepositions at phrase and clause boundaries.

Read the sentence pairs below, pausing as parsed at the slashes. Which sentence is parsed properly?

- The cranky duck /with the wacky /quack dives for /clams under the dock.*
- The cranky duck /with the wacky quack /dives for clams /under the dock.*
- Hank because / he was confused fed /his dog cat / food under the sink.*
- Hank /because he was confused/ fed his dog /cat food /under the sink.*

You can write your own sentences for exercises, or, as recommended by Don and Jenny Killgallon (2000), you can choose sentences to parse that good writers write as found in literature and from content text. Then, mine these targeted sentences for meaning.

- Parse and read these sentences.

He stood / broke through the drift / and shrugged the snow off (Paulson, 1985, *Dogsong*, p. 55).

He pulled back his lips / and showed the preacher / all of his crooked yellow teeth / and wagged his tail / and knocked some of the preacher's papers / off the table (DiCamillo, 2000 *Winn Dixie*, p. 7).

While Beetle and Purr / walked in the sunshine / waiting for the wife's temper to cool / enough for them to beg bread and cheese / and an onion or two / the villagers brought in / the last sheaves / from the field / and hay harvest over / sat down to eat and drink / and give thanks the rain had held off (Cushman, 1995, *Midwife's Apprentice*, p 36).

A cold wind / carried the scent of gunpowder smoke / down the ravine / and a strange wildness overcame me / as if a compass needle inside me / swung violently (Halse Anderson, 2010, *Forge*, p. 19).

What did Curzon (me) decide to do?

Why did he do it?

4. Sentence Completion

Complete each sentence by adding the missing subject, the missing verb, or both.

- slept in too late to see the sun rise.* (missing subject)
- Uncle Chuck with great gusto.* (missing verb)
- because Herman and Ethel always did it.* (dependent clause needs an independent clause)

5. Sentence Combining

Combine all the independent clauses into one sentence. (Strong, 1973). In this exercise, conjunctions are needed to put the puzzle together.

The dwarfs danced.

There were seven dwarfs.

The dwarfs sang as they danced.

They danced with abandon.

They danced around Snow White's bed.

The seven dwarfs sang as they danced with abandon around Snow White's bed.

Argument Structure and Semantic Roles

Syntactic categories and phrase structure do not tell you everything about usage. Argument structure adds another dimension. Here **argument** does not mean bickering with your sister over whose turn it is to walk the dog. Argument is a term linguists use to refer to semantic roles assigned by the verb. Nouns do not always have the job or role of being the subject or doer. In the anagram exercise above, some nouns fit the **done to whom or what** slot called the direct object. Nouns can take on other roles within a sentence, but the verb is the boss. Verbs tell nouns what roles to fill.

Verbs have a trick. They can be transitive (**trans-** = across) or intransitive (**in-** = not + transitive). To illustrate, read each example below and decide if each is a sentence or not. If not, why not?

1. *Stella put.*
2. *Stella put the dog.*
3. *Stella put out the door.*
4. *Stella put out the door the dog.*
5. *Stella put the dog out the door.*

Some roles are mandatory. A verb requiring only a subject doer is intransitive. **Beagles bark. Bark**, the verb boss, is satisfied with a **doer** subject, **beagles**. **Beagles bark** expresses a complete thought and is important information when acquiring a beagle. In contrast, a transitive verb creates other mandatory arguments or roles. The verb **put** requires a **done to or object** (**the dog**) and a **location** (**out the door**). A sentence does not express a complete thought until the mandatory roles assigned by the verb are filled. Sentences can also be expanded by adding optional roles. Emphasizing grammatical roles “increases the necessary language processing required for language sentence comprehension” (Eberhardt & Gillis, 2025, p. 39).

The verb sits at the hub of a series of questions that promote comprehension at the sentence level. Nouns, including the nouns in phrases, fill roles by responding to different questions. Using common sense terminology, here is a table of possible roles:

Role	Common Sense Name The ...	Question
Agent	Doer	Who or what (acted)?
Patient or Theme*	Done to whom or what	(acted) (to) who or what?
Location	Done where	(acted) where?
Goal	Done why, or for the sake of what	(acted) why? (acted) about what?
Source	Done from	(acted) from where?
Instrument	Done with what	(acted) with what?
Time	Done when	(acted) when?
Cause	Done by	(acted) by who or what?
Owner	Owned by	Whose (acted) noun?

*In linguistics, the terms patient and theme refers to *the done to whom* or *done to what*.

Instruction: Using Argument Structure and Semantic Roles

Argument structure takes students deeper than simple NP + VP = S phrase structure in accounting for meaning. It is a powerful tool for unlocking meaning from dense text.

1. Identify Mandatory Roles (Slots) (Moats & Rosow, 2020, p. 163)

- Decide if these bare-bones sentences are complete.
- If the sentences are not complete, add what is needed (mandatory) to complete them.

Bare Bones	Complete? Y or N	If No: What is needed?
I slept.	Y	
I buy.	N	Buy what? (theme)
I tell.	N	Tell whom? (patient) Tell (patient) about what? (goal)

2. Establish Roles, Common Sense Names, and Questions

The table provided below of roles, common sense names, and questions, can help students analyze sentences and get to the meaning. In general, common sense names are simpler and easier to understand than role labels. However, older students, and many younger students, like the formal, linguistic role terms because they are more sophisticated.

a. *Zahir poured steaming hot tea into the porcelain cup.*

Word	Role	Common Sense Name	Question
Poured: Zahir	Agent	Doer	Who poured?
Poured: tea	Theme	Done to	Poured what?
Poured: cup	Location	Done where	Poured tea where?

3. Identify the Main Verb(s) First

Finding the main verb(s) is not always obvious. Identifying the main verb(s) is key to getting at the meaning. It may take a discussion as to which verb(s) sit at the hub of the wheel where important questions are directed. After identifying the main verb(s), students then ask and answer questions directed by the verb that defines the roles.

Here is a sentence middle school students might find in a science text. Students begin by identifying the main verb, **contained**. They then ask and answer questions based on the verb.

All the molecules that make up our cells – carbohydrates, proteins, and fats – contained the element carbon (Pollan, 2011, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, p. 18).

- What contained? (**doer**) **the molecules**
- How many contained? (**doer**) **All**
- Molecules contained where? (**location**) **that make up our cells**
- Contained what kind of molecules? (**doer**) **carbohydrates, proteins, and fats**
- Molecules (**the doer**) contained what? (instrument, the **done with what?**) **the element carbon**

Here is a summary of the Gettysburg Address students might find in a social studies text. Again, first underline main verbs.

We stand on this ground, made holy by the sacrifice of the soldiers who fought and died here, to rededicate ourselves to creating a nation based on principles of liberty, equality and freedom.

Who stands? (**agent**)

We Stand where? (**location**) on this ground

What kind of ground? (**source**) made holy

Why holy? (**cause**) by the sacrifice of the soldiers who fought and died here

Who rededicates? (**agent**) we

To create what? (**goal**) a nation

Based on what? (**goal**) principles of liberty, equality and freedom.

Next, ask students to restate the sentence in their own words. The ability to restate a sentence indicates that students understand the sentence. If a student cannot restate in their own words, the use of argument structure, beginning with identifying the verb boss and then identifying the roles assigned, helps students build the meaning and restate with accurate truth value.

4. Sentence Expansion

Expanding sentences is also productive and fun. Begin with a bare bones or simple sentence. Add slots to fill in optional /additional information. It is a lot of fun to take turns.

Step 1: Start with a kernel sentence. This one was provided by a generous though not conscientious student in his nightly reading log reporting on his reading of the novel, *Flush*.

I am sorry that I didn't read *Flush*.

We worked with what we had – a reluctant reader and writer as well as a super smart, snarky kid, and the scraps of colored chalk for my Precambrian blackboard.

Step 2: Take turns placing X's where the kernel sentence allows for more information. We put in five but try for at least four.

X I X am sorry X that I X didn't read *Flush* X.

Step 3: Take turns filling in the X's. (*italics* = student; **bold** = teacher)

Even though I had tons of time and nothing much to do besides hang out, I, *Fred, the most magnificent and extraordinary boy*, am sorry as a dog who lost its bone, that I, *being like a sloth who was fast asleep*, didn't read *Flush* again.

Step 4: Finally, transform the kernel sentence and/or add or change the elaborated phrases as you please to make it the way you want it.

I, even though I had tons of time and nothing much to do, didn't read *Flush* again, like a sloth who was fast asleep, and therefore I, *Fred the most magnificent and extraordinary boy*, am extremely sorry, as sorry as a dog who lost its bone.

Try this at home or at school with your kids.

Conclusion

Syntax is a distinct layer of language structure and a critical part of language instruction. Knowledge of syntax supports reading accuracy, reading prosody, written expression, and especially comprehension.

Language is generative. As with other layers of language, a relatively small number of items, in this case eight parts of speech, are used as building blocks (Eberhardt & Gillis, 2025). These building blocks are combined, following fairly simple rules, into phrases and clauses to produce language. Students learn that parts of speech answer distinct questions: (1) how a basic sentence frame is built from combining a noun phrase and a verb phrase, (2) how prepositional phrases are used for sentence expansion, and (3) how conjunctions work to combine phrases and clauses. Learning and applying argument structure, with the verb assigning mandatory and optional roles, gives students a powerful strategy to get at the meaning of complex text.

Armed with a comprehensive understanding of syntax, a teacher will be prepared to target when and how to include syntax in direct instruction. Syntax instruction lends itself to integration with literature and content instruction (Killgallon, 2000). Teachers can choose sentences written by good authors that model complex sentence structure and contain targeted content.

Examples of instruction provided here align with Carlisle’s advice, “to explore the internal structure of sentences by creating, combining, and expanding them” (Carlisle, 2002, p. 127). Such syntax instruction follows explicit and sequential principles, going from simple to increasingly complex. Syntax instruction can be fun, engaging, and far more active than the grammar books and worksheets of yore, regardless of how Gertrude Stein felt about it.

Answer to this issue’s Curious Question:

Band-Aid, Cola, Kleenex, zipper, and travelogue* are commercial words adopted into English. In addition, some proper names have been adopted into the language, most famously *boycott, sandwich, and tobasco, but also lynch, shrapnel, and limousine.

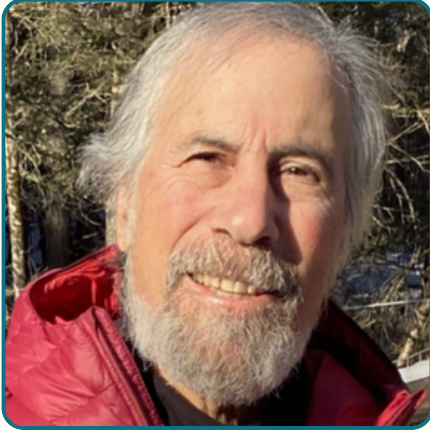
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Meet the Writer and Editors

Bruce L. Rosow, Ed.D., Language Tutor, Teacher Trainer & Author



Dr. Rosow has been an educator for 40 years. He has worked with students from pre-kindergarten through graduate school. Dr. Rosow began his career as an intermediate grade classroom teacher at Guilford Elementary School. Starting in 1991, he began training in structured-literacy instruction, studying with Dr. Louisa Moats at the Greenwood Institute. In 2008, Dr. Rosow completed his doctoral studies in educational psychology at American International College. Over this time, and for close to a decade, Dr. Rosow served as the Academic Dean of the Greenwood School, working with middle and high school students.

He then returned to public education, working in the Windham Central Supervisory Union, where he created and ran the Language Lab, providing remedial instruction to struggling readers. For almost two decades, Dr. Rosow also taught in the Language and Literacy Program at The Reading Institute, Simmons College and Bay Path University. Dr. Rosow and Dr. Moats recently completed the revision of *Spellography*, a word study curriculum for intermediate-grade students (95% Group, 2024). Dr. Rosow also co-authored the *Speech to Print Workbook*, 3rd Edition with Dr. Moats (Brookes, 2020). Dr. Rosow continues to tutor students, write curriculum, train teachers, and advocate for students with learning differences.



Hallie Cohen's expertise in structured language and literacy is grounded in extensive training and over 30 years of teaching experience. She currently serves as a language therapist and assistant to a speech-language pathologist at the Greenwood School in Putney, VT. Hallie is a Certified Academic Language Therapist and an Orton-Gillingham practitioner. Hallie's certifications include: Certified Academic Language Therapist through Academic Language Therapist Association and the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council; Certified Structured Literacy Dyslexia Interventionist through the Center for Effective Reading Institute; Advanced Orton-Gillingham training through Mayerson Academy, Mt. St. Joseph; and Orton-Gillingham

trained through the Children's Dyslexia Center. To expand her understanding of structured-language approaches, she trained in Lindamood-Bell's Visualizing and Verbalizing and Wilson's reading programs. In addition, Hallie has training in the alphabet phonics approach through Literacy Through Multisensory Teaching, a cohort established by Judith Birsh at Columbia Teachers College. Last year, Hallie began presenting her work on sentence-level comprehension at national conferences in New York and Georgia. She attended the Ohio State University, State University of New York - Binghamton, and Ithaca College, receiving degrees in music performance and education.



Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., A/OGA, has served as a teacher and principal for nearly 30 years in Vermont schools. After completing her undergraduate studies at Goddard College, she earned her Master's and Doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Vermont. As a postdoctoral Fulbright Scholar, she taught at the Technical University of Berlin and conducted research on democratic education in Germany. Since completing an Education Specialist Degree in Reading and Literacy Instruction at Bay Path University, Dr. Dorfman teaches evidence-aligned literacy at Barre Town Middle School.
