

TEACHING READING IN BRIEF WRITING IS COMPONENTIAL

VOL. 7, NO. 2

AUGUST 31, 2026

Multimodal K-3 Instruction in Sentence Writing: An Interview with Jill Pompi Conducted by Dorinne Dorfman



Jill Pompi, Ed.S.

Ms. Pompi has served as an elementary classroom teacher, reading specialist, literacy coordinator, principal, and district Title I and curriculum director. Ms. Pompi has trained thousands of preservice and practicing educators in Project Read curricula and other literacy programs in universities and school districts throughout Massachusetts and beyond.

Sentence Component Symbols from Framing Your Thoughts, a Heggerty program. Used with permission.
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An Introductory Note from Jill Pompi

Project Read was developed in 1973 by Dr. Mary Lee Enfield and Victoria Greene. The program was comprised of five sets (or strands) of materials: Phonics, Linguistics, Report Form, Story Form, and Framing Your Thoughts. The strands were designed to allow school districts to implement each independently or to adopt all five as a total language arts curriculum. In 2021, Heggerty acquired Language Circle Enterprises, the publisher of the Project Read curriculum. The new proprietor reimaged and redesigned the phonics portion and the Framing Your Thoughts and Paragraph Writing strands. The original materials created by Dr. Mary Lee Enfield and Victoria Greene are no longer available for purchase; however, many teachers and school districts continue to utilize the strategies and materials to teach and support students reading and writing.

The boys play in the park.



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Dorinne Dorfman: Project Read developed a hands-on approach to teaching sentence structure for reading and writing, specifically Framing Your Thoughts: Sentence Structure. What does this approach entail and what are the learning goals?

Jill Pompei: Tori [Victoria] Greene, the author of Framing Your Thoughts, really believed writing gave wings to creativity, and that every child could be a proficient writer. Greene's goal was to teach students to become proficient writers – at the sentence, paragraph, multiparagraph, and essay levels. This requires direct, explicit, multimodal instruction that starts with the simple and moves to the most complex.

DD: On a practical level, what does this instruction look like in terms of how and what the teacher is teaching and the students are doing?

JP: Tori was ahead of her time, using the Madeline Hunter method of lesson planning. First, the teacher states the goal and objective. Then the teacher models the skills. The students practice together, and then practice on their own with the teacher's corrective feedback. That's the gradual release of responsibility. Tori believed in application and transfer. Once taught, students need opportunities to apply those skills across different subjects. Research shows students make the greatest gains if they have **to write** about their learning, greater than showing their learning on a multiple-choice question, playing a game, or engaging in discussion. The research is clear: if you write about content, you own it more deeply. In the Carnegie Foundation's report, Writing to Read, Graham and Hebert (2010) found that

(1) students writing about the text they read improves their comprehension, and (2) increasing writing improves understanding of text. Additionally, a meta-analysis conducted by Graham, Kiuahara, and MacKay (2020) shows that writing requires organizing ideas, forces connections between concepts, reveals gaps in understanding, improves long-term retention, and promotes conceptual understanding. Students who write about subject matter consistently outperform those who do not on measures of learning and achievement, their study found.

DD: What brought you to this specific area of expertise?

JP: I graduated in 1989 with my Bachelor's in Education, where I learned a Whole Language workshop model for writing instruction. Then I went off to teach at a private school in Bennington for six years. During that time, I saw some students who knew how to write, but so many students needed so much more instruction, and I didn't know how to provide it. Then Janet Stratton [founder of The Reading Institute, now at Bay Path University] offered a four-day Framing Your Thoughts workshop on writing instruction, presented by Nancy Raskind. I loved their logical way of teaching writing – highly engaging, multimodal activities taught in a logical and sequential way and then woven across the content areas. I was hooked!

Soon after, I got hired in Clarksburg, MA, where their faculty was attending the same workshop with Janet. We implemented Framing Your

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We need to shift that mindset and provide the resources and tools so all teachers see themselves as writing teachers.
Our students need this from us.

– Jill Pompi

Thoughts: Sentence Structure as a whole K-6 school, and saw students make huge gains. Next, we added the paragraph-writing component. We used the same graphic organizers across the curriculum, so teachers and students could work smarter and not harder.

As a trainer, I continued learning about writing instruction from Joan Sedita and Judith Hochman. I found that Bruce Saddler's (2012) sentence-combining strategies were very important teaching resources. In addition, I spent time studying rubrics for writing assessment.

DD: How have these kinds of knowledge and skills been taught to students in the past?

JP: In my experience, there were two distinct camps for teaching sentence and paragraph writing. One camp did traditional sentence diagramming, finding the parts of speech in sentences. From my reading and practice, I saw this was a disjointed, separate practice, removed from writing across subject areas. Sentence diagramming alone did not improve students' writing in the content areas, especially because sentence structures get much more complicated. The other camp had no direct instruction. They

thought students would hear good writing in quality literature and internalize good sentence structure. This second camp didn't understand the need to teach those skills and give many opportunities for practice. Honestly, neither camp really taught students to write paragraphs and essays. Maybe they would fill out a brainstorming web together, but students didn't learn to do this on their own. Depending on the teacher, sometimes writing expectations were connected to the curriculum, but sometimes these were random standalone prompts.

DD: Were these widespread approaches effective?

JP: No. The NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] showed that students' skills have declined in many areas of literacy. In the early 2000s, the national report, *Writing: A Ticket to Work... or a Ticket Out* (College Entrance Examination Board, 2004), stated that schools and colleges did such a poor job in teaching students to write that employers had to teach new hires how to write sentences, communications, and reports. Today, if you talk to teachers, many will say children are struggling with writing. Teachers themselves are struggling because they don't have an approach to teaching writing. As a Framing Your Thoughts trainer, every single workshop participant asks, Why isn't this approach more widely known? Every teacher needs this, and students need it.

DD: What needed to be changed to improve?

JP: About the same time as *Ticket to Work*, another report was published, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution* (College





Writing is necessary. Writing is expected. Writing is the human expression of thought. Writing is liberating. Writing can feel hard. Writing can feel complex.

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Entrance Examination Board, 2003). This included recommendations to improve writing instruction.* For example, we need to increase the amount of time students are provided to write, and we should teach writing in all grade levels in all subjects. Sadly, this did not come to fruition. At the college level, preservice teachers need courses in how to teach writing. I also believe that school districts need to think about the professional development (PD) offered to teachers. They should provide high-quality PD, whether to new or veteran teachers, and that PD can't be a one-and-done workshop. It has to be ongoing. Additionally, schools really need to look carefully at how we assess student learning so it's less subjective and instead focuses on key components that can identify next steps for teaching.

***Recommendations from The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution:**

- a writing agenda for the nation;
- increased time (at least doubled) spent on writing;
- results should be measured;
- use of new technologies for writing should be undertaken and researched;
- writing should be required in every curriculum area; and
- teachers should be trained in how to teach writing.

From the Abstract, College Entrance Examination Board, 2003

DD: To what extent do you believe that evidence-aligned methods are implemented in schools presently?

JP: Unfortunately, I don't think that effective methods for writing instruction are implemented widely. We might see schools in pockets doing good work. In the courses I teach, both new and veteran teachers tell me their school has no systematic approach to teaching and assessing writing. I always get the highest rating for my writing courses, but I don't think it's just me. I think teachers are just hungry for it. They finally have the tools needed and can move their systems forward. Tori developed Framing Your Thoughts in the 1970s, but a systematic approach to writing instruction has yet to fully catch on.

DD: To improve students' knowledge and skills in this area, is this a matter of a few small changes, or will a significant or complete overhaul be needed, with new materials such as those in Framing Your Thoughts, as well as teacher training and support for teachers?

JP: I don't think it's a matter of small changes. First of all, we really need to get publishers to think about a highly effective writing curriculum for schools. We can look at What Works Clearinghouse for Educator's Practice Guides for elementary school (Graham et al., 2012) and secondary school (Graham et al., 2016). I have seen some reading programs that also offer a writing program, but often it's more tacked on and less well thought out. We need a consistent, systematic, and logical approach. If we teach school staff the approach, give them the materials, and specifically address how to teach writing in their content area, then we can make a real difference for students.

DD: At what grades or age levels do you feel these skills are crucial to be addressed?

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JP: I truly believe we can lay the foundation for writing in preschool and kindergarten. I have worked very closely with an Ohio school district. I have trained and coached teachers in teaching complete sentences. PreK and K teachers model and students orally practice creating sentences with a subject and action (predicate) from pictures. For instance, after seeing a picture of a dog they may say, "The dog runs." The teacher then prompts them to answer, "The dog runs **where?**" Or "The dog runs **when or how?**" The students can expand their original idea and say, "The dog runs happily in the field." This instruction should continue all through elementary school. Additionally, those PreK and K teachers modeled for students the use of graphic organizers. For instance, in Ohio, the students took monthly field trips. In September, they took a field trip to an apple orchard and returned to school to make applesauce with the apples they picked. After making the applesauce, the teachers introduced a graphic organizer for a procedural paragraph and modeled eliciting the materials and steps. They showed their students how to use the graphic organizer to write a paragraph. When they went to a pumpkin patch, the next month, the teachers were able to introduce a graphic organizer to compare and contrast the apple orchard visit and the pumpkin patch visit.

After the teacher modeled the use of the graphic organizer to construct a paragraph, the paragraph was sent home for families to read. This showed students that we write for authentic reasons and authentic audiences. The graphic organizers were used in every grade level, so when the kindergarteners went to first grade, they were already familiar with them. This Ohio school is a wraparound-service school; all the students qualify for free lunch. They are still implementing Framing Your Thoughts; I have been out there five times to train their staff. Everyone is so invested.

Sentence diagramming to identify and label subject and predicate with symbols from Framing Your Thoughts

Find and label the barebone **subject** and **predicate** in each sentence below.



- 1) The silly clown performed at the child's birthday party.
- 2) Our governor spoke at a press conference last week.
- 3) After finishing her homework, Angela played her favorite video game.
- 4) Did the teacher grade our tests yet?

Write your own barebone sentence for this picture:





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DD: What do you recommend for a scope and sequence, whether from specific programs or a list for skill progression?

JP: It's got to be a logical scope and sequence, starting with a barebone sentence which is the subject and predicate. Hochman & Wexler (2024) call it the "kernel sentence" and then teaches how to expand the kernel by answering questions to "explode" the sentence. First, write the kernel, the subject and verb. Next, expand the predicate area with when, where, how, and why. Afterward, make the subject more interesting with adjectives. But teachers need to be very explicit and deliberate in teaching sentence structure. For example, the adjectives include a lot of descriptive words. We should teach them in categories. First, we could teach adjectives that describe a physical characteristic (large, soft, brown). Then we can teach about adjectives that describe the behavior or personality of the noun (angry, silly). Next, we can teach about adjectives that show quantity (one, few, several, all). This is more manageable and leads to a more precise use of vocabulary. You can't wait until students know everything about sentence structure to teach paragraph writing. In a scope and sequence, there will be overlap, teaching and refining as students grow.

DD: Vocabulary, texts, and writing skills can become very complex at the secondary level. Once the foundations are mastered, what does this instruction look like? Is there still a role for programs like Framing Your Thoughts?

JP: There's still a role in keeping students' skills sharp. Sentence writing needs practice. We can compare this to math class, when at the beginning

of the year, the teacher starts with the basics for review. At the same time, we must honor the dignity of our students, based on their age. For example, the kernel sentence a teacher gives may be a topic of interest, such as a newspaper headline like, **The Market Crashes**. Or the teacher may challenge students to use more sophisticated vocabulary. Rather than say, **The dog runs**, challenge students to think of more sophisticated words to produce sentences such as. **The canine scurries**. One time, we had a ninth grader who read Edgar Allen Poe's story, **The Masque of the Red Death**, and wrote a summary composed completely of kernel sentences. The student's writing was extremely powerful and also very helpful for the process of considering what makes a sentence. When teachers consider their content area and vocabulary, teaching foundational sentence writing can be very age-appropriate.

DD: What is most important for every educator to know when it comes to teaching students sentence-level writing?

It's better for teachers to give instruction and practice in shorter bursts, say fifteen minutes, three times a week or every school day, rather than in a longer period just once a week, but schools actually need to dedicate much more time to writing instruction.

– Jill Pompi

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JP: The Swedish psychologist Anders Ericsson (1993) said that for practice to improve skills, teachers must have clear goals linked together and sequenced. These goals must be difficult enough to pose a challenge, but not so difficult that students will shut down. Think of Goldilocks, not too easy and not too hard. For this to happen, schools need a logical, step-by-step scope and sequence for writing instruction. Teachers need professional development in the curriculum and must have permission to speed up or to pace the curriculum more slowly based on students' progress. Teachers also need to learn ways of embedding their academic content into sentence writing so that students learn more deeply from writing about the subject. Teachers need to provide students with immediate corrective feedback. It's better for teachers to give instruction and practice in shorter bursts, say fifteen minutes, three times a week or every school day, rather than in a longer period just once a week, but schools actually need to dedicate much more time to writing instruction.

DD: How can teachers assess their students' writing on a regular basis?

JP: I firmly believe in writing rubrics for more formal writing, but teachers can also use entrance and exit tickets to ensure that students are learning the content and skills. I can have students write an answer to a question prompt. For example, after reading *Miss Rumphius* by Barbara Cooney to 2nd graders, I could ask the students to write a sentence about Miss Rumphius that included phrases in the predicate area that answered where, how, when, and why questions. I might expect something such as,

Miss Rumphius happily traveled to many countries throughout her life because she wanted to explore the world. If I were working with 5th graders, who just learned about the water cycle, I might challenge them to write the process in bare-bones sentences on their exit ticket. I would expect something such as, Vapor condenses. **Clouds form. Precipitation falls. Water evaporates. Vapor rises.** Then I check students' work for sentence structure and content comprehension. I read through them, look for trends such as problems with spelling or capitalization, or if the content was incorrect. This all informs my instruction for the next day. If it's the content, I may have them reread a section with a goal in mind, engage them in discussion, and have them write a response to a prompt on an exit ticket.

DD: Do you recommend a specific rubric?

JP: I find the 6+1 rubrics (Education Northwest, 2021) very effective and share these with my graduate students. These are free online on the Reading Rockets website. School districts may give benchmark writing prompts using this rubric at the start and end of the year. In between, teachers might focus on one trait at a time, such as sentence fluency, word choice, ideas, or another trait based on their students' results. There are student-friendly versions of the 6+1 trait rubric. It is very important to introduce those to students prior to writing.



Finish these sentences. Use your starter words.

1) The child _____ .



2) Evan and Ross wrestle _____ .



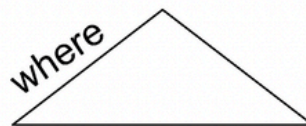
DD: What else might teachers use to assess student writing?

JP: Checklists can also be handy, such as the COPS checklist: Capitalization, Overall Appearance, Punctuation, and Spelling, from the WWC Educator's Practice Guide, Teaching Elementary School Students to be Effective Writers (2012).

DD: How can writing data be used effectively and efficiently when schools are awash in data right now?

JP: Schools have to prioritize writing as a focus area and provide the time for teachers to review student work. Teachers need to look at their class's data and whittle that down to skill areas. It requires schools to be thoughtful in the data they collect. More is not always better. For instance, I once worked with a district that had three different phonics assessments, but no phonemic awareness assessments. We decided to keep one phonics assessment and add in a phonemic awareness assessment. This was much more thoughtful. For assessing writing, schools can provide the rubric and time to score student work using it, realistically twice a year, and the rest of the time focus on certain writing elements. We need data, but it needs to be quality data.

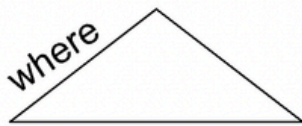
Sentence
diagramming
to identify
underlying
structures



A. Mark the subject, predicate, and where expander in these sentences.

- 1) The lightning flickers in the distance.
- 2) Pictures hang on my grandmother's refrigerator.
- 3) The ball rolled under the green armchair.
- 4) Dorothy paced up and down the long hallway.

Sentences can and should have added details that tell **where**, **when**, **why**, or **how** the predicate happens.



The boys play in the park .

After breakfast, the boys play.



The boys play because they love baseball.



The boys play fairly.



DD: Project Read materials no longer seem to be available for purchase. Multimodal writing programs like this are hard to find. What do you recommend using as a replacement?

JP: The company was sold to Heggerty, which took the phonics portion and redesigned the content for their program, Bridges to Reading. They took the writing portion and created Bridge to Writing. I continue to use Framing Your Thoughts materials, as well as The Writing Revolution and Keys to Literacy. For teacher training, I continue to use the principles of Framing Your Thoughts because these are tried and true.

DD: What are the principles for effective writing instruction?

JP: The principles include a logical scope and sequence that is sequential. The teaching begins with the most simple concepts and moves to the more complex. Instruction includes direct, explicit, multimodal instruction and employs the gradual release of responsibility. It also requires the opportunity for application and transfer to content areas.

DD: Which teachers are responsible for teaching sentence-writing skills?

JP: All teachers are responsible for teaching sentence-writing skills. In an ideal world, teachers could collaborate – the classroom teacher, special educator, and interventionist could work together to teach the same [sentence-writing] content. There are school districts where these teams meet weekly, but in truth, I rarely see this, and when I do, they're not as intentional as they need to be for improving student learning. In high school, math and science teachers and others will



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say they're not writing teachers. We need to shift that mindset and provide the resources and tools so all teachers see themselves as writing teachers. Our students need this from us.

DD: In addition to teaching higher education, you have conducted extensive teacher training as well as provided coaching directly to teachers in schools. What have you found that many or most teachers need in learning how to teach sentence structure and other writing skills?

JP: School districts need to invest in teachers and consultants to develop their writing scope and sequence and to work closely with classroom teachers to navigate teaching these skills. Until we provide teachers time to plan those lessons, assess students' learning, and collaborate with colleagues, we're making the job harder than it needs to be. Providing a one-and-done workshop is like nailing jello to a tree. Very little sticks! There has to be the opportunity for ongoing support.

DD: If you could convey one message regarding this area to educators today, those in the classroom, administration, or higher education, what would it be?

JP: School administration needs to understand that educators have an overwhelming task to ensure all students succeed. Rather than continually putting more on teachers' plates, we need to take something off. We need to teach teachers to work smarter, not harder. No teacher goes to school wanting their students to fail. We need to give teachers the tools and the time for collaboration so they can make magic happen.

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About Jill Pompi, Ed.S.

Jill Pompi is an educator with more than thirty years of experience in literacy, curriculum, and school leadership. She earned a B.S. in Elementary Education from Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, an M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction and reading specialist certification from MCLA, and an Ed.S. in Language and Literacy from Simmons University. She also holds elementary principal and superintendent licensure.

Ms. Pompi has served as an elementary classroom teacher, reading specialist, literacy coordinator, principal of a Pre-K–8 school, and district Title I and curriculum director in Massachusetts. She has also worked as a literacy consultant for schools nationwide and taught graduate and undergraduate courses at MCLA, Bay Path University, Simmons University, and Westfield State University.

A published co-author and presenter on literacy and instructional practices, Ms. Pompi holds certifications in Wilson Reading, Orton-Gillingham, Project Read, and Structured Literacy with the Center for Effective Reading Instruction. She was named Berkshire County Educator of the Year in 2015 and received MCLA's Distinguished Educator Alumni Award in 2017.

Meet the Team



Dorinne Dorfman, Ed.S., Ed.D., A/OGA, has served as a teacher and principal for 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.

Dr. Brenda Warren has been studying and evaluating reading instruction for the past 20 years through three different lenses: as a pediatrician, school board member, and parent of a now-adult son with dyslexia. Her main interest has been examining how districts can overcome barriers preventing scientific reading research from fully impacting classroom practice, with a goal of ensuring that academic equity is present in our schools. In 2010, her work led her to pursue a doctorate in Education Leadership to study this topic in more depth. She graduated with her PhD in 2018. Her dissertation title is: *Closing the Science-to-Practice Gap for Reading Instruction: A Case Study of Two Schools Transitioning from Balanced Literacy to Scientifically Based Reading Instruction*.

