Syntax Modeling Exercise #1

In the beginning, it is best to model strategies using a document reader (projector), Smart Board, or overhead transparency. As students practice the strategies, they will learn to understand the power of syntax and how to use syntax in their own writing. Select a short (2 or 3 sentences) quotation from the work of an established writer and taken from appropriate content used in the classroom.

**Note:** Even though the example below is one sentence, it is from an established writer and taken from appropriate content. We limited the selection to one sentence to enhance your understanding as you are learning about syntax.

**Quotation:**

But George sat stiffly on the bank and looked at his right hand that had thrown the gun away.

--John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*

**Complete the following.**

1. The dependent clause, *that had thrown the gun away*, is used as an adjective to modify the word *hand*. What effect does this have on the meaning of the sentence?

2. Compare Steinbeck’s sentence with the following:

   George, *who had thrown the gun away*, sat stiffly on the bank and looked at his right hand.

Both sentences have dependent clauses that modify nouns, but the clauses modify different nouns. Fill out the following chart indicating the dependent clauses, the nouns they modify, and the effect this has on meaning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Clause</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Effect on Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steinbeck’s sentence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New sentence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Modeling:

Write a dependent clause that completes the following sentence:

Sarah gazed at the road and thought about her plans _____________________.

Your dependent clause should not modify the word *plans* and give meaning to the sentence. Use Steinbeck’s sentence as a model.

**Syntax Modeling Exercise #1 - Suggested answers:**

1. The dependent clause makes George’s right hand into an independent actor. *George* does not throw the gun away. Instead, his *hand* does the work. The implication is that the hand could also *shoot* the gun independently. This syntactic structure removes the responsibility and control from George.

2. The chart reveals the power of syntax to emphasize meaning.

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<tr>
<th>Dependent Clause</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Effect on Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steinbeck’s sentence</td>
<td>hand</td>
<td>Places the responsibility for the action on the hand, absolving George of any responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who had thrown the gun</td>
<td>George</td>
<td>Places the responsibility for action on George instead of his hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>away</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Modeling:** Any sentence that correctly uses a dependent clause to refine meaning is acceptable. Examples are:

- Sarah gazed at the road and thought about her plans that would never materialize.
- Sarah gazed at the road and thought about her plans which kept changing.
- Sarah gazed at the road and thought about her plans that she made with her friend.
Syntax Modeling Exercise #2

For this second strategy, follow these steps:

1. Select a short quotation from the work of an established writer.
2. Write two discussion questions that point out the syntactic features of the quotation.
3. Help students use the quotation as a model to write a similar sentence or paragraph of their own.

Quotation:

The seven years’ difference in our ages lay between us like a chasm: I wondered if these years would ever operate between us as a bridge.

--James Baldwin, “Sonny’s Blues”

Complete the following:

1. What function does the colon serve in this sentence?
2. How would the meaning and impact of the sentence change if the sentence read as follows:

   The seven years’ difference in our ages lay between us like a chasm, and I wondered if these years would ever operate between us as a bridge.

Modeling:

Write two independent clauses; join the two with a colon, giving emphasis to the independent clause which follows the colon. Use Baldwin’s sentence as a model.

Syntax Modeling Exercise #2 – Suggested answers

1. Colons direct the reader’s attention to the words that follow and emphasize those words. The purpose of this colon is to indicate that closely related information will follow. The chasm of the first clause is connected to the bridge of the second clause, and the possibility of reconciliation for the characters in the sentence is raised through the syntax. In fact, the colon almost becomes the bridge the narrator is looking for.
2. The change would shift the meaning and lessen the impact. Two independent clauses joined by a comma and conjunction indicate equal weight of both clauses. Two independent clauses joined with a colon have a prescribed relationship; the second clause explains, summarizes, or amplifies the first. Baldwin’s sentence draws the connection between the chasm and the bridge with the colon and emphasizes the possibility of bridging that relationship. His syntax indicates semantic possibilities. The new version reduces the second
clause to speculation and diminishes the connection between syntax and meaning.

**Modeling:** Any appropriate sentence following Baldwin’s pattern will do.

**Example:** The book lay before me like a mountain. I wondered if the book would ever become a navigable pass.