

## Resisting “Can You Hear It?”: Helping ELL Clients Build Grammatical Awareness

Though tutors should have strong grammar skills, they cannot always accurately diagnose ELL students’ syntactic or grammatical errors. However, tutors must never ask ELL clients if they can “hear” the errors in their prose. When you encounter a sentence with complex grammatical or syntactic errors, try one of the strategies below.

Remember that ELL clients have diverse backgrounds in English language knowledge. International students, particularly students from East Asia, tend to have a better understanding about grammatical forms. Resident ELL students--bilingual (or trilingual) students who were educated in the United States--might have less knowledge about grammatical constructions.

### **Option A: Build sentences grammatically**

Tell the client that you want to improve the sentence’s clarity. Follow the next steps to create a clearer (and often more direct and active) sentence.

1. Ask the client to identify the most important actor in the sentence. Write the actor on a separate sheet of paper. The actor will now function as the subject of the sentence.
  - a. Take time to explain the idea of the sentence’s actor. Students might not understand the concept, so be sure to give examples by drafting simpler sentences.
    - i. Some students – particularly resident ELL students – might not understand the concept of the subject of the sentence. If applicable, take time to explain the relationship between subjects, verbs, and objects.
2. Help the client choose a descriptive verb that accurately captures the actor’s actions.
  - a. Explain the problem with “to be” or other auxiliary verbs.
  - b. Discuss choosing a verb that appropriately captures your meaning. You might want to talk about connotations that accompany certain verbs, verbs that sound (and could easily be confused for) other verbs, or general versus specific verbs.
    - i. Refer clients to resources to help them choose the best verb.

*LTP Dictionary of Selected Collocations* – This resource, available on the WC bookshelf, is a dictionary of word combinations that can help your client connect appropriate verbs to their sentences’ subjects. The dictionary allows ELL clients to better understand natural English and word combinations that “sound right” but are often difficult to explain.

*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* – This dictionary provides a [dictionary] as well as The Oxford 3000 Vocabulary Trainer. Use the exercises to create questions that you can use to ask clients about vocabulary, grammar patterns, and relationships between words. You can also use the Vocabulary Trainer to identify verbs that correspond with particular nouns.

3. Discuss the relationship between the subject and the verb and the rest of the sentence. Use the above resources to find appropriate vocabulary for the rest of the sentence.
4. Think of the sentence's predicate in terms of its specific grammatical structures. Avoid explaining irrelevant grammatical structures, but coach the client to write clearly and concisely.

Independent practice

Students can independently edit sentences with complex syntax by breaking their sentences apart grammatically. Beginning by identifying the sentence's most important subject and verb can help student focus on drafting clear and effective sentences.

Why use this strategy?

The building sentences strategy is effective for students confident about what they aim to communicate. The strategy gives students a concrete strategy for organizing their complex ideas.

**Option B: Create a meaning map**

Explain to the client that you want to explore the relationship between his/her ideas.

1. Turn the paper over and choose a blank piece of paper.
2. Ask client to describe, in his or her own words, what he/she was trying to express in the unclear sentence.
3. Write down client's key pieces of content.
4. Draw a flow chart that connects each idea in a logical manner. What information needs to be introduced first, and why?
5. Once you and the client agree on the relationship between ideas, help the client shape the flow chart into a sentence (or two, three, four sentences).

Independent practice

Students can independently edit sentences with complex syntax by making a list of the most important pieces of content and mapping relationships between pieces of content.

Why use this strategy?

The meaning map forces clients to prioritize content over sentence aesthetics. When clients are particularly overwhelmed, the meaning map can boost their confidence by illustrating their meaningful content and visually expressing each part's relationship to the whole.

### **Options A & B: Drafting and Revising**

Follow these directions to preserve your client's ideas, to illustrate the writing process, and to bolster client confidence.

- ✓ Emphasize that your client's sentences do not need to be perfect.
- ✓ Never cross out or erase information. Instead, ask the client to revise the sentence below the original draft so that s/he can see his/her evolving ideas.
- ✓ Combine different parts of various sentence drafts to help client accurately express his/her ideas.

### **Moving Forward**

- ✓ Working in a standing appointment? Ask the client to keep copies of developed sentences (and copies of the process of developing sentences) in a "sentence journal." You and your client can refer to this sentence journal as you move forward throughout the semester. Reflecting on his/her sentence drafting process will allow him/her to repeat the sentence-drafting process in subsequent appointments and, ultimately, independently.

### **Appendix for Option A**

#### Original Sentence

Old Saint Patrick's Church resembles people's willing to build up orders by purifying their heart with ethic believes, as one of the oldest churches in Chicago.

- |                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Most important actor:             | Old St. Patrick's Church   |
| 2. Action:                           | stands for, represents, illustrates, commemorates                |
| 3. What does OSPC <i>represent</i> ? | Early Chicagoans' faithfulness and dedication to ethical action. |

#### Revised Sentence

Old St. Patrick's Church represents nineteenth century Chicago residents' faithfulness and dedication to ethical action. \*

\*This revision is not perfect and still leads to some questions: What did Chicago residents have faith in? How does the church represent congregants' dedication to ethical action? However, the revision represents a strong step in the direction of increased clarity.

**Appendix for Option B**

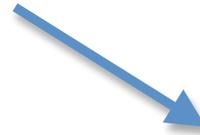
Original Sentence

It is that time that political structures and police stations are built up as powerful tools to bring the city back to orders.

City officials + built ... What did they build? When?



Political structures and police stations ... Why?



During the last third of the nineteenth century



In order to + restore, revive, rebuild



citywide order.

During the last third of the nineteenth century, city officials built political structures and police stations in order to restore citywide order.