

**Sentence Focus
Activity**

Sentence Blocks

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Talk a Lot

How to Use

Sentence Blocks – Instructions

Designed specifically for the Talk a Lot course, the sentence block method is a brand new way to teach English grammar with speaking practice. The main benefit of this method is that the students have to do all of the work. They must listen, think hard, and remember. They must produce eight sentences, both positive and negative, using a given verb form, and two different question forms, using wh- questions and questions with auxiliary verbs. They must produce the eight sentences based on a given starting sentence and a given wh- question word, using a pre-agreed set of rules. When they are working on the sentence blocks students are speaking and memorising correct English. They are learning to use key verb forms in English, forming questions and responses organically as they focus all their attention on making the sentence blocks successfully. They are also learning new vocabulary and have to produce their own ideas to make the last two negative sentences work.

So what is a sentence block and how do you make one? A sentence block is a group of eight consecutive sentences, made up of seven lines, that forms a two-way conversation. There are strict rules governing how a sentence block must be made, which students should learn.

At the beginning of the course:

The students receive two handouts explaining the basic terminology used when talking about sentence blocks and some helpful rules for making them (see pp.2.8-2.9). The teacher should spend time discussing these pages with the students, in particular explaining:

- When we use each of the eight verb forms that are explored during the course
- What we mean by subject-verb “inversion”
- How auxiliary verbs are used, and the rule for using “do” as an auxiliary verb

In the first lesson or two the teacher will need to train the students to make the seven lines that form a sentence block. In the ensuing lessons students should be able to form the sentence blocks themselves, based on the given sentences on the board or handout. It is very important that in each lesson the teacher ensures that students understand the vocabulary used in the sentence blocks before they are let loose on the task of making them.

This is an example of how an individual student could be coached to form a sentence block for the first time. When coaching groups, ask a different student for each of the lines.

The teacher has written the first starting sentence on the board; for example, this one from the “Music” lesson in Book 2:

We saw a great jazz concert at the Palace Theatre last night.

The teacher:

OK, we’re going to make a sentence block. There are seven lines in a sentence block and eight different sentences. [Pointing to the board at the starting sentence.] This is the first line. Can you read it for me, please? [The student reads it out loud.] Do you understand this sentence?

The student:

Yes.

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The teacher:

OK. [Writes “Where” underneath the starting sentence.] To make the second line can you ask a “where” question based on the starting sentence?

The student:

Where did you see a great jazz concert last night?

The teacher:

Good. Very good. Excellent.

Note: if a student has a problem producing any part of the sentence block, the teacher should prompt them with the first word, then the next, and in this way “coax” the sentence out of them by, if necessary, saying the whole sentence and getting the student to say it with them, then to repeat it without the teacher’s help.

The teacher:

And what is the short answer?

The student:

At the Palace Theatre.

The teacher:

OK. Great.

Note: it is very important that the teacher praises the student as they get sentences right and gently encourages them when they have taken a wrong turn. It is also important for the teacher to keep the momentum going so that the sentence block is made with a sense of rhythm and an almost urgent pace. This will keep the student focused and thinking about the task in hand.

The teacher:

So now we’ve got three lines. Can you repeat them for me? [The student does so correctly.] Now, let’s get to five lines. Ask a question with inversion.

The student:

Did you see a great jazz concert at the Palace Theatre last night?

The teacher:

Good. And the short answer?

The student:

Yes.

The teacher:

Yes, what?

The student:

Yes, we did.

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The teacher:

Good. Very good. So now we've got five lines. We're almost there. Can you repeat the five lines, please? [The student does so correctly.] OK, so, to complete the sentence block, let's ask the same kind of question with inversion but this time to get a negative answer. Look at the question word. Focus on the "where". Change the "where" to get a negative answer.

The student:

Did you see a great jazz concert at *the Roxy* last night?

The teacher:

And give a short answer in the negative.

The student:

No, we didn't.

The teacher:

Then a full negative answer. The last line is made up of two negative sentences.

The student:

We didn't see a great jazz concert at the Roxy last night.

*Note: students have to invent something here ("...at **the Roxy** last night?") that makes sense in the same context. They should try to think of a sensible option to get a negative answer. For example, the teacher must not accept: "Did you see a great jazz concert at the newsagent's last night?" because it doesn't make sense. Students often struggle to remember to make two negative sentences for the last line. Encourage them and stress the two negative sentences.*

The teacher:

Excellent! Now tell me all seven lines...

Throughout, the teacher should help the student to achieve the correct pronunciation, sentence and word stress (see sections 12 and 13 of this handbook), rhythm and intonation. If a student makes a mistake during a line, ask them to repeat the whole line again. Of course, in the example above the student has given almost all of the correct answers straight away. This is purely to serve a purpose in this handbook – to give a clear example of what the students should aim for. The teacher should also encourage the students to think about word and sentence stress and to emphasise the correct words in each sentence, for example:

Did you see a great jazz concert at **the Palace Theatre** last night?

Yes, we **did**.

Did you see a great jazz concert at **the Roxy** last night?

No, we **didn't**. We **didn't** see a great jazz concert at **the Roxy** last night.

Students may have a tendency to try to say all seven lines with a questioning intonation at the end of each line. For example, they might say:

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Sentence Blocks – Instructions

The student:

Did you see a great jazz concert at the Roxy last night? No, we didn't?

Ask them to think about the meaning of what they are saying and to make definite statements without the questioning intonation. Some students may try to gabble and deliver their lines very quickly without apparent thought of what they mean – wholly focused on their goal of remembering each line and forming the sentence blocks as quickly as possible. Ask them to slow down and to focus on what each sentence means.

So, in the example above the seven lines and eight sentences of the sentence block are:

1. We saw a great jazz concert at the Palace Theatre last night. (*starting sentence*)
2. Where did you see a great jazz concert last night? (*wh- question*)
3. At the Palace Theatre. (*short answer*)
4. Did you see a great jazz concert at the Palace Theatre last night? (*question with inversion*)
5. Yes, we did. (*short answer*)
6. Did you see a great jazz concert at the Roxy last night? (*question with inversion to get a negative answer*)
7. No, we didn't. We didn't see a great jazz concert at the Roxy last night. (*two sentences – a short negative answer and a long negative answer*)

The teacher should ensure that the students follow the sentence block structure and that they recap each group of sentences after the 3rd and 5th lines. If a student has a tendency to “Um...” and “Er...” their way through each line, challenge them to say the lines without doing this. As they monitor the pairs engaged in making the sentence blocks – saying one line each – the teacher will sometimes need to be firm with the students, and ask them to keep focused when it looks as though their minds are beginning to wander, and of course the teacher also needs to keep focused! For example, when leading sentence block practice at the front of the class, the teacher will need to be one step ahead of the students and know the next sentence in their mind – what they want the student to produce – before the student produces it.

Embedded Grammar

In each lesson students will practise making positive sentences, negative sentences, and two different kinds of question forms using the following verb forms:

- present simple
- present continuous
- past simple
- past continuous
- present perfect
- modal verbs (e.g. can, should, must, have to, etc.)
- future forms (with “will” and “going to”)
- first conditional

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While doing sentence block practice the students may be unaware that they are using eight different verb forms. It is better not to focus on this and blow their minds with grammar, but instead make sure that the students are making the sentence blocks correctly. For example, it is essential that students understand the eight starting sentences on the board or handout at the beginning of the lesson, and also know how to make a sentence block, before they begin pair work with a partner.

The starting sentences all contain embedded grammar, which means grammar that occurs as a natural part of the sentence block as it is being spoken and automatically memorised, rather than grammar that is explicitly presented to students as an isolated grammar topic, such as: “In today’s lesson we are going to study wh- questions...” etc. The embedded grammar in the sentence blocks at Elementary level includes:

- positive and negative forms
- use of articles
- use of auxiliary verbs
- a variety of main verbs in each unit
- subject and object pronouns
- yes/no questions
- wh- questions
- active and passive sentences
- punctuation marks
- prepositions of place and time
- some/any
- singular/plural
- nouns: common, proper, abstract, countable, uncountable, etc.
- intensifiers – too, really, very, completely, etc.
- use of infinitives
- adjectives
- adverbs of frequency and manner
- possessive pronouns
- determiners – this, that, those, these, etc.
- there is/there are
- formal and informal situations
- use of gerunds
- comparatives and superlatives
- relative clauses – that, which, who, where, etc.

The teacher could pick up on any or all of these grammar topics in more detail if they run the course as a 60-hour course (see Course Outline on p.1.2).

Miscellaneous Notes

- As well as with students in groups and pairs, this method can also be used successfully with students on a one to one basis, with the teacher prompting the student to produce the sentence blocks, first with the sentences on the board or handout, and later from memory.

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- Teachers (or students) can also imagine their own starting sentences based on the verb form or vocabulary that they wish to practise (see blank template on p.2.7).

Different Ways to Practice Forming Sentence Blocks

- In a circle – the teacher or a student leads and chooses each student in turn to form the complete sentence block.
- The students sit back to back in pairs and say one line each, then reverse who starts.
- The students chant a complete sentence block altogether as a group.
- The students say one line or one word each, going around the group in a circle.
- The teacher says a random line from a sentence block and asks a student to produce the next line.

Note: every sentence block can be said or chanted in a continuous way by adding an **eighth line** at the end that begins with “So...” and continues with the question on line 2. For example:

Line 1: Joanne can play the saxophone really well.

Line 2: Who can play... [etc.]

Line 7: No, he can't. George can't play the saxophone really well.

Line 8: So, who *can* play... [then, continuing with line 3, “Joanne can.” and so on...]

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Topic: _____

Sentence Blocks

1. *Verb Form:* _____
Starting Sentence: _____

Question Word: _____

2. *Verb Form:* _____
Starting Sentence: _____

Question Word: _____

3. *Verb Form:* _____
Starting Sentence: _____

Question Word: _____

4. *Verb Form:* _____
Starting Sentence: _____

Question Word: _____

5. *Verb Form:* _____
Starting Sentence: _____

Question Word: _____

6. *Verb Form:* _____
Starting Sentence: _____

Question Word: _____

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Sentence Blocks – Q & A

Q: What is a sentence block?

A: A sentence block is a group of eight consecutive sentences, made up of seven lines, that forms a two-way conversation. It consists of positive and negative sentences, and two question forms – a wh- question and two questions with inversion (“yes-no” questions).

Q: What is a starting sentence?

A: The first sentence in a sentence block.

Q: What is a wh- question word?

A: A question word that begins with “wh-”. For example, “what”, “where”, “when”, “who”, “why”, “whose”, and “which”. “How” is also a wh- question word because it contains the letters “w” and “h”. Wh- questions are asked to obtain information, rather than a “yes” or “no” answer. They have a **falling intonation**, which means that the tone of your voice does not go up at the end of the question, as it does with “yes-no” questions.

Q: What is a question with inversion?

A: Also known as a “yes-no” question, because the answer is usually “yes” or “no”, a question with inversion is a question where the subject and verb have been swapped around (or “inverted”). They always start with an auxiliary verb (be, have, or do), a modal auxiliary verb (e.g. can, will, must, should, etc.), or verb “to be”. For example, this sentence is a statement: “John is a DJ”. To make this statement into a question with inversion we need to swap around the verb (“is”) and the subject (“John”) to make: “Is John a DJ?” Questions with inversion always have a **rising intonation**, which means that the tone of your voice has to go up at the end of the question.

Q: What is an auxiliary verb?

A: Auxiliary verbs are helping verbs. They don’t have any meaning of their own in the sentence, but they help the main verb to form a verb phrase. For example, in this sentence: “Jean was riding her horse in the field for half an hour this morning”, “was” is an auxiliary verb (from verb “to be”) which works together with the main verb “riding” to make the past continuous verb form. There are three primary auxiliary verbs in English: “be”, “have” and “do”, as well as modal auxiliary verbs such as “can”, “will” and “must”.

Q: What is each of the eight verb forms used for?

A: The uses of the verb forms studied during this course can be summarised as follows:

Present Simple:	to talk about regular actions and things that are always true
Past Simple:	to talk about completed actions in the past
Present Continuous:	to talk about what is happening at the moment
Past Continuous:	to talk about continuous actions in the past: what was happening when...
Present Perfect:	to talk about past actions which are quite recent or relevant to now
Modal Verbs:	to talk about permission, possibilities, ability, and probability
Future Forms:	to talk about future plans, predictions and intentions
First Conditional:	to talk about what will happen if a certain condition is met

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Sentence Blocks – Six Great Tips for Students

1. During each lesson we work with the same verb forms in the same order. Look for patterns. Each lesson try to apply what you have learnt in previous lessons.

2. After a "wh" question or phrase (such as "What time...?" or "How long...?") there must follow an auxiliary verb or main verb "to be".

3. Questions with inversion always start with an auxiliary verb or main verb "to be".

4. In questions with inversion the subject of the sentence must follow the auxiliary verb.

5. If there is either auxiliary verb **be** or **have** in the starting sentence, use it to make the questions and answers that follow. If there isn't, you must use **do** as an auxiliary verb to make the questions and answers.

6. Use as much of the starting sentence in the resulting questions and answers as you can.

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