

Improve Children's Grammar with these Dice Games



With these dice games, children will understand how changing a single preposition can make a powerful impact on the reader, say Christine Chen and Lindsay Pickton...

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Children learn to write beautifully primarily by being exposed to beautiful writing, not by naming the component parts of a sentence; indeed, we have heard a number of inspirational children's authors decry the teaching of grammar, pointing out that they never needed to know what a subordinate clause was.

While we understand where this comes from, there's much more to grammar than parsing; it's an integral feature of language. Maybe it just needs better PR!

Grammatical terminology provides teachers with a shared language for giving children feedback on their writing.

In the same way we might say, “Try using a simile there,” we may also say, “There’s some repetition in your prepositions,” or, “A lot of your sentences begin with adverbials; try moving some of them into different positions.”

More importantly, though, there is the acquisition of mindful writing: an awareness of how the selection of words and phrases has an impact on meaning, and therefore the reader. For us, this is the real purpose of grammar: understanding how language can be manipulated to achieve different ends – in both comprehension and composition.

Dry, label-the-parts grammar lessons do not support the above. Encouraging a playful, experimental – even risk-taking – attitude to language through grammar games, however, gives children the chance to understand the impact of their choices, and those of others; and this is why we love creating them.

Some games involve drama and explore the ways in which language choices influence action and behaviour; others investigate clarity and precision in the description of characters and scenes.

Then there are activities that play with the impact of syntax and clause structures. But here it’s our ever-evolving dice games we’d like to share. These help to take the fear out of grammar, introducing a little magic through the element of surprise. Why not try the examples in this article and adapt them for your children?

How to teach grammar with dice

To play Every Word Counts, create a six-word sentence, and attach a number to each word, in order:

She leapt from the plummeting helicopter.
1 2 3 4 5 6

First, consider the story: who might she be? Whose helicopter is it? Why is it plummeting?

With each throw of the dice, consider a range of alternative words that will work in the sentence and carefully examine how each alteration changes its meaning. Obviously, if we throw a 6 and change helicopter to something like dragon, we have completely

changed the genre. But notice too how even changes to words with a grammatical function can make an impact.

Look what might happen, for example, if we throw a 4:

- She leapt from a plummeting helicopter.
- She leapt from her plummeting helicopter.
- She leapt from that plummeting helicopter.
- She leapt from my plummeting helicopter.

Once children have experienced this, you can introduce the grammatical terminology beneath the sentence; the correct labels will be acquired, over time, while the focus stays on manipulating the meaning.

They lunged at the closed door.

1 2 3 4 5 6

1. pronoun
2. verb
3. preposition
4. determiner
5. adjective
6. noun

So, if you throw a 3, say, "Change the preposition." But always keep the emphasis on how meaning is affected while teaching the terminology.

You may also modify the game in order to challenge children's knowledge of terms. Create the sentence without numbering the words; keep the numbers on the terminology list, but in the wrong order:

Then, I leapt onto the motorcycle.

1. preposition
2. noun
3. adverb
4. determiner

5. pronoun

6. verb

If you throw a 3, say, "Change the adverb." To do this, children have to know which word is the adverb! Again, always keep the focus upon the story created by the vocabulary exchanges, as this is what grammar is for; though important, terminology is a secondary benefit.

Experiment with structure

The basic dice game can be modified to introduce varied sentence structures, for example, starting with a preposition:

Across the crowded room he strode.

1 2 3 4 5 6

1. preposition

2. determiner

3. adjective

4. noun

5. pronoun

6. verb

Or with an abstract noun:

Panic swept through the bustling bazaar.

1 2 3 4 5 6

1. abstract noun

2. verb

3. preposition

4. determiner

5. adjective

6. noun

This structure is a particular favourite of ours – applied in composition, it conveys mood in a very immediate and concise way.

Notice how much impact you can achieve through swapping abstract nouns (eg peace, bliss, anticipation) or verbs (eg trickled, stalked, tiptoed).

To really emphasise how grammar choices influence meaning, you may use a sentence from a class story – one you are reading or composing together.

He struggled up the swaying beanstalk.

1 2 3 4 5 6

1. pronoun
2. verb
3. preposition
4. determiner
5. adjective
6. noun

With each change, consider what has happened. Changing the pronoun to I, she or they significantly alters the telling of the story, whereas changing the verb might affect the mood, e.g He bounded up the swaying beanstalk.

Changing the mood

Great writers affect us, and they do this through the language choices they make. By contrast, the assessment frameworks appear to encourage children to ‘do grammar’ to their writing, resulting in a dispiriting tick-it-off-the-list style that shows little or no awareness of impact on the reader.

If we attach grammatical choices to desired moods or atmospheres, however, children discover the affecting power of language while fulfilling national curriculum requirements.

Mood-Maker is a game that teaches children to make their language choices in pursuit of creating a particular atmosphere. Play can be based on any of the versions of Every Word Counts explained above, but you should use a deliberately bland starting sentence. Begin by generating six moods, attaching a number to each

1. creepy
2. joyful
3. shocking
4. sad
5. funny
6. exciting

An initial dice throw selects the mood that should be applied to every word choice that follows. For example:

She walked to the old building.
1 2 3 4 5 6

1. subject
2. verb
3. preposition
4. determiner
5. adjective
6. noun (object)

Throwing a 1 means the mood is creepy. Throwing another 1 means you have to change she in a way that contributes to creepiness, eg it. Then, if you throw a 5, the adjective must also be creepy, eg haunted or derelict.

Thus, She walked to the old building could become It stalked towards their derelict cabin

A more complex version of the same game might look something like this:

He walked up the stairs.

Mood:

1. creepy
2. joyful
3. shocking
4. sad
5. funny
6. exciting

Grammar:

1. Change the subject
2. Change the verb
3. Change the determiner
4. Add an adverbial for when
5. Add an adverbial for how
6. Expand the noun phrase

Again, the initial dice throw defines the mood. Subsequent throws direct the alterations and additions. Don't feel you have to work through all six functions as this may lead to a clumsy sentence, which is the last thing we want. Thus, 'He walked up the stairs' might become 'The masked man leapt explosively up my attic stairs'.

Can you work out the mood defined by our first dice throw? If not, we need to work on our choices, and you may be able to suggest something better!

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