

Juicy Sentence Guidance

Why engage in “juicy sentence” work?

Far too often, students who struggle with reading and language are given simplified, uninteresting texts. These texts are judged to be “at-the-students’ language or reading level” but deny students access to rich, interesting, age-appropriate text. When students are denied access to rich text, they never get opportunities to see complex rhetorical structures, academic language and vibrant vocabulary, and powerful examples of how to organize and convey thought. In short, they never get to see the type of text we expect them to be able to read, and the type of writing we expect them to emulate. Perhaps most importantly, they don’t see reading as something enjoyable; something that helps them learn about the world; something they will do for a lifetime.

It isn’t as easy as simply putting these high-quality texts in front of students, however. The language used in complex texts differs from the language most students will encounter through everyday speech. This poses a number of challenges, especially for English Language Learners (ELLs), when it comes to comprehending text that features challenging academic vocabulary, complex syntax, unfamiliar grammatical features, and informational density. Often, students find grade-level, complex sentences impenetrable, **but that does *not* mean they are unable or unready to comprehend complex text.** Students will be able to successfully work with complex text if they are given guidance on how to use the elements within sentences to make meaning.

The guidance below outlines some ideas for fostering conversations around “juicy sentences,” where-by students learn to deconstruct and reconstruct sentences, understanding how different language features contribute to meaning. Additionally, regular guided practice with unpacking sentences will give students the tools they need to make meaning from future sentences that use the same syntactical features, grammatical structures, and vocabulary—opening access to even the most challenging texts.

The juicy sentence is a strategy developed by Dr. Lily Wong Fillmore; additional information about her work can be found in this article:

https://ul.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/resource/2021-12/06-LWF%20CJF%20Text%20Complexity%20FINAL_0.pdf.

What is a “juicy sentence”?

Picking a strong sentence to focus on with students isn’t as challenging as you may think! Here’s a check-list of things to consider when selecting a phrase, sentence, or set of sentences worthy of your attention and that of your students. **Note: Not all features must be present in every sentence you choose to study.**

- Comes from grade-appropriate complex text. Not sure? Use one of these [text complexity analysis tools](#) to check.
- Comes from a text that is conceptually connected to content being discussed in class already—STEM, history, social studies, and ELA texts all make great candidates! This allows students to build on and reinforce the knowledge and vocabulary they’ve acquired from other texts.
- Has high informational density (i.e., multiple pieces of information are contained in the sentence and/or can be construed from its subtext)
- Is “chunkable” – you can break it apart into smaller sections for focused discussion. There isn’t a rule about the exact right number of chunks, or the right number of words or phrases that constitute a chunk, but think strategically about the ideas each chunk is conveying—don’t leave students hanging by splitting apart an idea into two chunks! The important thing is that your selected sentence allows for in-depth discussion and deconstruction into multiple sections: there should be multiple ideas to discover within the sentence/segment. In preparation, you might list out the separate ideas readers can learn from the sentence. This will help you see if your sentence is “chunkable” and where to break it apart.
- Features language related to complex thought, where readers are asked to interpret motivation, rationale, time, place, contingencies related to actions, etc.
- Features grade-level academic language. Use the [Academic Word Finder](#) tool to make sure the sentence includes vocabulary that is at or above grade-level complexity.
- Contains complex noun phrases (nouns that are modified or expanded by other phrases)
- Contains adverbial clauses
- Uses passive voice
- Includes linking phrases
- Introduces a metaphor or simile

Example of a juicy sentence:

Sentence Chunk	Discussion/Meaning
During September and October of 1774	<p>This part of the sentence explains the chronological time period during which the action of the sentence took place. It situates the action within a specific time period in American history shortly before it became an independent country. You might discuss the following things:</p> <p>When did this event take place?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>During</i> the months of September and October.• <i>Of</i> 1774. Using the preposition “of” in this way shows that the months mentioned were in 1774. It’s as if they “belonged” to 1774. <p>Why might the author have used “<i>during</i>” instead of a simpler term like “<i>in</i>”?</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>During</i> implies a lot of action occurring throughout the entire time period mentioned. It makes the reader think about all of the days that are in September and October, and how work happened on all of those days. • <i>During</i> is a polysemous word--in this phrase it is a preposition that indicates an expanse of time in which something took place but it could also mean “at a particular point in the course of this time:” (e.g., “During the party, someone spiked the punch.”) You might discuss the meanings with students and have them draft or share aloud sentences in which they use <i>during</i> in both senses.
delegates from all 13 colonies	<p>This chunk includes the subject of the sentence and helps illustrate what a big deal the event was by explaining that all colonies sent a delegate. You might discuss the following things:</p> <p>What is this sentence about?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The <i>delegates</i>. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What is a delegate? ○ What does it mean if you delegate something? ○ Why was it a big responsibility to be a delegate? • Where did the delegates come from? What does it mean to “come from” somewhere? • Were there any colonies that didn’t have a delegate? How do you know? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use of “<i>all</i>” • Why do you think the author included the word “<i>all</i>”? Why didn’t she just say “from the 13 colonies.”? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use of “<i>all</i>” implies how momentous this was—no one missed this opportunity.
met together	<p>This chunk of the sentence is the verb or action of the sentence. It describes what the delegates did. You might want to discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the sentence say about the delegates? (Note: it might seem more natural to say “what did the delegates <i>do</i>?” but this type of question won’t work with sentences using forms of “to be” when the subject isn’t doing anything or acting at all. This is actually the most common verb in English! It’s more helpful to use this broader question so that students become used to looking for all verb types in sentences.) • The use of the word “<i>met</i>.” Students will likely be familiar with what it means “to meet” someone for the first time, but in this instance, “<i>met</i>” is used in the sense of getting together, even though many of the delegates already knew each other. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ While you won’t have to do this with every polysemous word (word that has multiple definitions), “<i>met</i>” is a word students will likely encounter in a variety of contexts so it would be valuable to discuss the various meanings and how they’re related (even if the relationships are tangential). You might let students take action here, looking up the words in a dictionary or online, discovering the various definitions for themselves and determining which meaning is being used here. • Why do you think the author used “<i>met</i>” instead of just saying “were together”? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “<i>Met</i>” implies deeper engagement with each other. ○ Likewise, the use of “<i>together</i>” to modify “<i>met</i>” underscores that the delegates were working with one another; they weren’t just sitting in the same room!

In one place	<p>This chunk of the sentence is a prepositional phrase that begins to describe the location of the meeting. You might want to discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of the preposition “<i>in</i>” to denote location • The connection to “in Philadelphia” later in the sentence. “<i>In Philadelphia</i>” further elaborates on “<i>in one place</i>.” Why might the author have included “<i>in one place</i>”? Why didn’t she just say “<i>in Philadelphia</i>”? They are both describing the same location. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “<i>In one place</i>” helps underscore how unprecedented this meeting was. Having everyone come from each colony to a single place was not easy, especially in the 1700’s when travel was difficult.
for the first time ever	<p>This chunk of the sentence is a prepositional phrase that further describes the action of the sentence. It further underscores the importance of this event. You might want to discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did a meeting of all the delegates like this happen frequently? How do you know? • Discuss the meaning of the phrase as a whole. This phrase is a formulaic phrase (meaning that it is a fixed expression that is always said the same way). In this instance, the phrase means what it says, so students can deconstruct the parts to find meaning, but be aware that other formulaic sentences (e.g. “this won’t take but a second”) will be much harder to comprehend and will require more discussion. • What does the word “<i>ever</i>” mean? How does it relate to the word “forever” that students may be more familiar with? • Why do you think the author chose to include the word “<i>ever</i>”? Why not just say “for the first time”? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ “<i>Ever</i>” underscores how impressive this was. Without the word “<i>ever</i>” readers would still understand that this was the first time the delegates had all met, but adding “<i>ever</i>” is almost like an exclamation.
in the First Continental Congress	<p>This chunk of the sentence is another prepositional phrase describing the action of the sentence, the “meeting.” You might want to discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students may be more familiar with the use of “<i>in</i>” to describe location (e.g., <i>in</i> my house). In this instance it refers not to a physical location, but to the newly established group (e.g., students are <i>in</i> a class, but that doesn’t mean they need to physically be in the classroom. They are still <i>in</i> the class when they are outside at recess).
in Philadelphia.	<p>This chunk of the sentence is another prepositional phrase that describes where the action took place, and further elaborates on the “<i>one place</i>” mentioned earlier in the sentence. You’d want to make sure students see the connection: that the “<i>one place</i>” is <i>Philadelphia</i>.</p>
George Washington	<p>This is the subject of the next sentence. You might briefly discuss who George Washington was to ensure students have the appropriate background knowledge to understand why he was mentioned.</p>
was one of the delegates.	<p>This is the verb clause. You might discuss</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the context of this sentence, what was George Washington? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ George Washington was one of the delegates. How many more delegates were there? • Considering what you know about George Washington, what do you think the other delegates were like? • Why do you think the author specifically chose to mention George Washington being one of the delegates? Why didn’t she name someone else?

Strategies for juicy sentence discussion

Juicy sentence discussions can occur in any grade (in grades K-2, they are best done with read-aloud texts) and there isn't one "right" way to go about them. But there are some discussion topics you'll likely want to include in a teacher-led juicy sentence discussion in order to help students understand the selected sentence and identify text features (and their purpose) so they can make meaning from future texts.

Here's one method:

1. Display the sentence for students to read (this might be done on chart paper, on a smart-board, etc.) Consider color-coding the individual "chunks."
2. Begin by reading the sentence aloud. This might be done several times (e.g., once by the teacher, once as a choral read-aloud, etc.)
3. Go chunk, by chunk, inviting students to figure out and explain what each part means. You might have students engage in short partnered discussions about the meaning of certain chunks before engaging in whole-class discussions.
4. Record their student-friendly interpretations for the class. Return to the student-authored interpretations at multiple points in the discussion, making the connections between student-language and the language of the text.
5. Discuss the text features and vocabulary included in each chunk that contribute to meaning. Teachers should prepare questions and conversational starters that direct students' attention to features such as:
 - a. Grammatical structures, punctuation, and the meaning of complexly structured phrases such as noun phrases with several modifiers or adverbial phrases.
 - b. Vocabulary (and its contribution to meaning within the sentence)
 - c. Subtext themes
 - d. Meaning of metaphors or similes
6. Once the class has discussed each chunk, have the class work together to create a chart that says what each chunk means.
7. Ask the students to describe what the sentence means as a whole, now that each of the components has been discussed. One strategy to employ at this point is to physically cut apart pieces of paper featuring the different chunks, and asking students to put them back together in a way that makes sense for conveying meaning.