

Example Lesson Plan: Sentence Expanding

For Middle School Students

As students become more adept at crafting clear, accurate simple sentences, educators may begin to identify ways in which students can expand these sentences by adding details and varying sentence structure. This allows students to add more detail to their writing and communicate more complex thoughts. For more information on explicit instruction in sentence expanding, see our blog post [“Sentence Expanding: Helping Students Build Stronger Sentences.”](#) by Jennifer Knight, Ph.D.

This example lesson plan models teaching students to expand simple sentences by answering the questions when, where, why, and how. It also includes a sample notes sheet and a sentence expanding practice activity.

The text of this lesson plan is intended to serve as an example of what a lesson on this topic might look like. It is not intended to be read to students verbatim. Rather, teachers should feel empowered to use the example plan as an outline for building their own unique lesson. That said, scripted explanations of terms, concepts, and activities can be used as desired.

Sentence Expanding Middle School Example Lesson

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Materials: lesson plan, document camera, Sentence Expanding Notes, Sentence Expanding Words and Phrases Bank, sentence strips, small bags or envelopes, chart paper, Sentence Expanding Practice

Additional Resource: For more on sentence expanding, read the Iowa Reading Research Center blog post [“Sentence Expanding: Helping Students Build Stronger Sentences” by Jennifer Knight, Ph.D.](#)

Set Goal and Purpose

Today, we are going to learn a writing skill called sentence expanding. Sometimes, writing is missing important details that allow readers to visualize, or picture in their minds, what is happening in the text. When we expand or stretch, a sentence, we add important details to it to make it more descriptive. Descriptive writing lets readers visualize what they are reading and clearly understand what the author is saying.

Our goal today is to expand simple sentences so they meet the following criteria:

1. *Our expanded sentence answers our four key questions (When? Where? Why? How?).*
2. *Our details allow readers to create a clear picture in their heads of the action in the sentence.*
3. *Our expanded sentence can be read fluently.*

Modeling

Before we begin, let’s review what a simple sentence is. If you don’t remember, look at our sentence expanding notes to help you.

My turn: *A simple sentence is a sentence with one subject-verb combination.*

Your turn: *A simple sentence is a sentence with one subject-verb combination.*

If correct: Excellent, you know what makes a simple sentence.

If incorrect: Stop. My turn. A simple sentence is a sentence with one subject-verb combination. Say it with me. What makes a simple sentence?

The subject describes who or what the sentence is about.

The verb tells us the action. Some verbs tell what the subject does or did, while others tell what the subject is or was.

A simple sentence can have more than one subject or more than one verb, but there will only be a single subject-verb combination.

Simple sentences tell us who or what is doing something.

To expand a simple sentence, we will add details that answer the following key questions: Where? When? How? Why?

I will begin with an example. Let's read this sentence together. [Display sentence on screen using a projector, or on a sentence strip.]

The man went down the stairs.

Ask students:

Q: Who is the subject of this sentence or the "who" or "what" that is doing something?

A: The man

Yes, the man is the subject of this sentence.

Q: What did the man do?

A: Went down the stairs

Yes, the verb here is "went," so this part of the sentence tells us the action or what the subject did.

Now that we have identified the subject of our sentence as well as the action in our sentence, we will begin adding details that will allow our readers to visualize this text. I am going to cut this sentence apart at the line here to make it easier to add those details as we work. [Cut the strip between the words "man" and "went."]

Today, we will be able to add details using words from word banks. Each word bank has words or phrases that answer one of our key questions. The examples provided in the bank are a starting point for you. You are welcome to use them, but they are not the only choices to add details and expand the sentence. Feel free to use your own words or phrases as well.

As I complete an example with you all, I will choose words and phrases from the banks to make sure my expanded sentence answers all of our key questions. I also will decide the best place to put those words and phrases by thinking about the meaning of my sentence, what I want to communicate to my readers, and whether or not the sentence can be read fluently (or smoothly).

Guided Practice

1. *As I read this sentence, I notice it doesn't tell me how, when, where, or why the man went down the stairs. Answering these questions will make the action of the sentence more clear to the reader. I am going to start by answering the first of those questions: how. By telling readers how the man went down the stairs, I am helping them create a more accurate picture in their heads of what is happening in this sentence.*

There are many different ways a person can go down stairs. For example, someone may choose to go down the stairs slowly, carefully, or clumsily. These words are adverbs; they describe verbs, which are actions. For my sentence, I'm going to choose the word "quickly" from our words and phrases bank. [Display the word "quickly" on a small sentence strip.]

Next, I need to read the sentence to decide the best place to put the word. I can't just put the word anywhere in the sentence and expect it to make sense because changing the location of a word or phrase can change the meaning of a sentence.

For example, if I put "quickly" right after "The", my sentence will read "The quickly man went down the stairs." This sentence is confusing because it sounds like we are trying to describe the man instead of answering how the man went down the stairs.

There are other places in this sentence where we could add "quickly" without the sentence losing its clarity and meaning. "Quickly" is an adverb; it describes the action in the sentence. I am going to start by putting it at the end of the sentence. I want to read it to see if the sentence makes sense. [Place the word "quickly" after the phrase "went down the stairs."] When I place it there, the sentence reads: The man went down the stairs quickly. As a reader, I can understand how the man went down the stairs, and I can read this sentence fluently. This is an appropriate place for the adverb.

Now, I am going to move this detail before "went down the stairs." [Place the word "quickly" before the word phrase "went down the stairs."] By putting it right before the verb, I am making sure my readers can easily connect the adverb to the verb. When I place it there, the sentence reads: The man quickly went down the stairs. It still allows readers to understand how the man went down the stairs. For our example, I will leave it here.

2. Next, I will choose a detail that tells the reader **where** the man was when he went down the stairs. "Where?" is another one of our questions to expand our sentence. It does not matter in which order I answer the four questions, but I need to be sure they make sense for what I want to communicate in my sentence. Telling the reader where the action is happening is a logical detail in a sentence about a man going down stairs.

I'm going to think of some places a person may go down stairs. Someone may go down the stairs at a department store, in their apartment, or into a basement. These prepositional phrases can answer the question "Where?" for my readers. For my sentence, I'm going to choose the word "into the basement" from our words and phrases bank. [Display the phrase "into the basement" on a small sentence strip.]

Now, I will read the sentence to decide the best place to put the phrase [Read the sentence aloud:] *The man went down the stairs.* I will start by putting it here [Put phrase after "The man"]. Let's read this together. [Class reads: *The man into the basement quickly went down the stairs.*] Does this sentence sound correct? Does the sentence still have a clear meaning? Could there be a better place to put this detail so we can read the sentence fluently? [Teacher solicits student responses.]

I am going to add this detail after "went down the stairs." [Place the phrase "into the basement" at the end of the sentence.] Now, I will reread the sentence with our new phrase to make sure it makes sense: *The man quickly went down the stairs into the basement.* This sentence has clear meaning because as a reader, I can understand and visualize a man going down a flight of stairs into a basement.

3. We've told our reader how and where the action of our sentence takes place. Now that we know how and where he went down the stairs, maybe we should add a detail that tells the reader **when** the man went down the stairs. He could go down the stairs on Saturday or at 8:30 a.m. What are some other words or phrases that could tell us when the man went down the stairs? [Solicit student responses.]

I'm going to choose the phrase "last night" to tell my reader when he went down the stairs.

[Display the phrase "last night" on a sentence strip.]

Let's read the sentence to decide the best place to put the phrase. [Read the sentence aloud:]

The man quickly went down the stairs into the basement.

First, I am going to add this detail after "quickly." Let's read the sentence now. [Class reads: *The man quickly last night went down the stairs into the basement.*] What does this sentence mean to you? Does this sentence sound correct when we put the "when" detail right after the "how" detail? Is there a better place for me to put this detail so we can read the sentence fluently?

[Solicit student responses.]

I will place it in another spot in my sentence. [Place the phrase "last night" at the beginning of the sentence.] Now, I will reread the sentence with our new phrase to make sure it makes sense.

[Teacher reads:] *Last night, the man quickly went down the stairs into the basement. I think this is a great place for this phrase because it lets the reader know when the action took place, and it doesn't confuse the reader about what is describing how and what is describing when the man went down the stairs.*

4. *Finally, I will choose a detail that tells the reader **why** the man went down the stairs. This is the last of our four questions to expand our simple sentences. Let's think about why a man would go down the stairs into the basement quickly at night. One reason could be to find something he needs urgently. Another reason could be to investigate a suspicious sound. Why do you think a man would quickly go down the stairs into a basement at night? [Solicit student responses.]*

I am going to use the phrase "to fix a busted pipe" as the answer to my "why." [Display the phrase "to fix a busted pipe."] I like this phrase because it contributes to the meaning of the sentence. If a pipe was busted in the basement, someone would need to get to it in a hurry so the basement wouldn't flood. This allows the reader to picture what is happening. It also makes sense within the context of the sentence.

I will read the sentence to decide the best place to put the phrase [Read the sentence aloud:] Last night, the man quickly went down the stairs into the basement. Let's start by putting it after "last night." Now the sentence says, "Last night to fix a busted pipe the man quickly went down the stairs into the basement." I don't think this is the best place for this phrase. It's hard to read this sentence fluently and keep track of the point of our sentence. Where else can I put this phrase so the sentence keeps its meaning and can be read fluently? [Solicit student responses.]

For this example, I am going to add this detail after "into the basement." [Place the phrase "to fix a busted pipe" at the end of the sentence.]

Now, I will reread the sentence with our new phrase. [Teacher reads:] Last night, the man quickly went down the stairs into the basement to fix a busted pipe. Now we have a sentence that has answered all four of our key questions, can be read fluently, and has meaning to the reader because it can be visualized and makes sense.

Independent Practice

Today, you will practice adding details to expand, or stretch, sentences.

Each pair of students will receive blank sentence strips, a words and phrases bank, and a set of simple sentences.

Your job is to expand these simple sentences so they meet our three criteria:

1. *Our expanded sentence answers our four key questions: When? Where? Why? How?*

2. Our details allow readers to create a clear picture in their heads of the subject and action in the sentence.
3. Our expanded sentence can be read fluently.

As you work, refer to the posted steps titled "How to Expand a Sentence" and the expanded sentence checklist. These will help you make sure you meet our criteria.

Remember, when you add your details, it is important that you choose an appropriate place in the sentence for those details. There may be more than one place for you to put your new details. It is your job to read the sentence to make sure it can be read fluently and your details create a clear picture.

Provide pairs with words and phrases bank, blank sentence strips, and a marker. Monitor student work by listening to pairs as they discuss their sentences.

Steps of Expanding Sentences

The following steps and student checklist may be used to help students complete this task in pairs or independently.

How to expand a sentence

1. **Read** the simple sentence.
2. **Choose** a key question to answer.
3. **Brainstorm** (or choose from the bank) a word or phrase that answers the key question.
4. **Place** the word or phrase in the sentence.
5. **Read** the sentence with your new detail.
 - If the sentence can be read fluently and has clear meaning, leave the detail there and go to your next key question.
 - If the sentence cannot be read fluently or does not have clear meaning, change the location of the detail and repeat steps 4 and 5.

Expanded sentence checklist

- o Sentence has a **where** detail.
- o Sentence has a **when** detail.
- o Sentence has a **why** detail.
- o Sentence has a **how** detail.
- o Readers can **visualize** what I wrote.
- o Readers can easily **understand** what the sentence means.
- o Sentence can be read **fluently**.

Assessment

Students may work cooperatively after initial instruction to expand simple sentences on chart paper by writing or pasting words and phrases together to meet the criteria for an expanded sentence.

To assess individual students, have each student complete the sentence expanding practice page independently.

Initially, teachers may decide to provide a words and phrases bank for students to use. As they improve, students may create their own words and phrases that answer the four key questions. Ultimately, application of the skill should move to student writing, with students finding simple sentences within their own compositions and expanding them to add details to their work.

To assess partners, set up chart paper where groups can show how they expanded each simple sentence by writing or taping their expanded sentences. The following rubric may be used to assess student work.

Developing	Needs Improvement	Sufficient
One or no key questions (when, where, why, and how) are answered through the addition of details.	Two or three of the key questions (when, where, why, and how) are answered through the addition of details.	All four key questions (when, where, why, and how) are answered through the addition of details.
Placement of details obscures the meaning of the sentence, making it difficult for the reader to understand what is taking place.	One or more of those details are placed in a way that obscures the meaning of the sentence.	Placement of details allows readers to construct meaning and create a clear visual of the action in the sentence.
Sentence fluency is absent due to misplacement of detail.	Sentence fluency may be absent due to misplacement of detail(s).	Sentence fluency is evident.
<p>Example: The man went down the stairs last night.</p>	<p>Example: Last night, the quickly man went into the basement down the stairs.</p>	<p>Example: Last night, the man quickly went down the stairs into the basement to fix a busted pipe.</p> <p>OR Last night, the man went down the stairs into the basement to fix a busted pipe quickly.</p>

Sentence Expanding Notes

Middle School

Notes

Complete sentences start with a _____ letter and end with a _____ mark.

A **simple sentence** is a sentence with one subject-verb combination.

- Simple sentences tell _____ or _____ is doing something.
 - The subject tells _____ or _____ the sentence is about.
 - The verb tells us the _____.

Stretched sentences give the reader extra _____ by answering these questions:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Example

The man	went down the stairs.
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1. Who/what is the subject? _____
2. What did the man do? _____
3. Where? _____
4. When? (last night)
5. Why? (to fix the busted pipe)
6. How? (quickly)

Our expanded sentence:

_____, the man _____ went down the stairs _____
_____ to fix a busted pipe.

Suggested sentence from lesson plan: Last night, the man quickly went down the stairs into the basement to fix a busted pipe.

How to expand a sentence

1. **Read** the simple sentence.
2. **Choose** a key question to answer.
3. **Brainstorm** a word or phrase that answers the key question.
4. **Place** the word or phrase in the sentence.
5. **Read** the sentence with your new detail.

** If the sentence can be read fluently and has clear meaning, leave the detail there and go to your next key question.*

** If the sentence cannot be read fluently or does not have clear meaning, change the location of the detail and repeat steps 4 and 5.*

Expanded sentence checklist

- o Sentence has a **where** detail.
- o Sentence has a **when** detail.
- o Sentence has a **why** detail.
- o Sentence has a **how** detail.
- o Readers can **visualize or picture** what I wrote.
- o Readers can easily **understand** what the sentence means.
- o Sentence can be read **fluently**.

Sentence Stretching Words and Phrases Bank

Middle School

HOW WORDS		
absentmindedly	happily	cautiously
irresponsibly	giddily	carefully
quietly	loudly	beautifully
quickly	lazily	effortlessly
soon	separately	twice
cheerfully	together	awkwardly

WHERE PHRASES	
outside the window	in the backyard
at the grocery store	in the hallway
under the table	behind the swing set
on the floor	around the classroom
at the park	inside the closet

WHEN WORDS AND PHRASES

during the meeting	last night
at noon	this morning
during recess	last Monday
during breakfast	last week
at bedtime	yesterday

WHY PHRASES

to get a pair of shoes	because she was disappointed
because they did not want to share	so I could escape
to get out of the rain	because of the heat and humidity
because someone told a funny joke	although she made a mistake
even though he was mad	due to extreme exhaustion

Simple Sentences

The siblings	argued
The rabbits	jumped in the grass
We	went to sleep
The manager	refunded the customer's money
I	ran away from the dog
My aunt	screamed
Our teacher	laughed
The brown cat	purred

Sentence Expanding Practice

Middle School

Name: _____ Date: _____

Teacher: _____ Period: _____

Directions

Expand/stretch the following sentences by adding details that answer each of the key questions. You may use examples from the Sentence Expanding Words and Phrases Bank, or you may make your own. Rewrite the sentence to include your new details.

1. **Simple sentence:** *My dad laughed at me.*

a. **Who/what (subject):** *My dad*

b. **Did what:** *laughed at me*

c. **How:** _____

d. **When:** _____

e. **Where:** _____

f. **Why:** _____

My stretched sentence: _____

2. **Simple sentence:** *The baby giggled.*

a. **Who/what (subject):** *The baby*

- b. **Did what:** *giggled*
- c. **How:** _____
- d. **When:** _____
- e. **Where:** _____
- f. **Why:** _____

My stretched sentence: _____

3. **Simple sentence:** *Our chairs wobbled.*

- a. **Who/what (subject):** *Our chairs*
- b. **Did what:** *wobbled*
- c. **How:** _____
- d. **When:** _____
- e. **Where:** _____
- f. **Why:** _____

My stretched sentence: _____

4. **Simple sentence:** *My hands were shaking.*

a. **Who/what (subject):** *My hands*

b. **Did what:** *were shaking*

c. **How:** _____

d. **When:** _____

e. **Where:** _____

f. **Why:** _____

My stretched sentence: _____
