

# Making a Sentence

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## Overview

This is a light-hearted, entertaining play that will engage students – it is set on a dairy farm where eight characters try to make a sentence. Two of the characters are nouns (animals) and the other six represent articles, a verb, an adjective, an adverb, and a full stop. This clever idea provides readers with a visual way of learning how parts of speech work to form an interesting sentence that sounds correct.

The narrative is straightforward as words are added to build a sentence. In a twist at the end, two characters change places to alter the meaning. The actors hold large cards to show their names: the play could be performed with eight actors or be adapted.

Students will need some experience of constructing sentences and be able to connect the abstract idea of characters representing parts of speech. This may be confusing for some students, but using props (name cards for the characters) should help. The play uses mainly simple sentences and a standard play format. Some students may need support to understand the colloquial language.

*Note: The basic mechanics of the simple sentence structure may be suitable for English language learners at earlier stages of proficiency. However, the range of sentence structures within this text, the New Zealand farm context, the colloquial language, and the inferences needed (often based on language knowledge) mean that this is likely to be a challenging text for English language learners.*

Texts related by theme

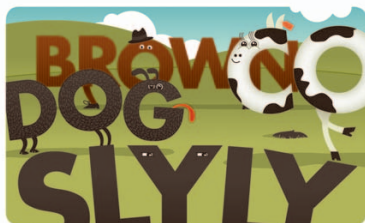
“Full Stop” SJ 1.4.07 | “Pet Commas” SJ 2.3.10 | “Stop That Punctuation!” SJ 4.3.05

## Text characteristics from the year 4 reading standard

some abstract ideas that are clearly supported by concrete examples in the text or easily linked to the students' prior knowledge

a straightforward text structure, such as a structure that follows a recognisable and clear text form

**NIPS.** Hang on a second, Dog. I'd like to know how you nip. Lightly? Suddenly?  
**THE.** You're right, Nips. An adverb would be useful. (THE whistles again.)  
**SLYLY** (enters, stands between **DOG** and **NIPS**, and waves). Hello, everybody. I'm Slyly.  
**DOG.** “The dog slyly nips a cow.” That's me – crafty and cunning! Now, can we go, please?  
**COW.** How about giving me some description? I'm still just a cow! I'm very sensitive about this sort of thing.  
**DOG.** Get over it, Cow!  
**THE.** Mind your manners, Dog. That's a good idea, Cow. We need some colour. (whistles) Let's have an adjective.  
**BROWN** (enters and stands next to **COW**). Hi, fans! Brown's the name. Colour's my game!  
**DOG.** OK, OK, OK! “The dog slyly nips a brown cow.” Satisfied at last, Cow?  
**COW.** Well, the sentence is better, but we all know that sentences finish with a full stop. Where is it?



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**THE** (sighing). Details, details. (whistles) Full stop!  
**FULL STOP** enters and stands quietly at the end of the sentence.  
**COW.** Now we've got a sentence, but I still don't like the way you're nipping me – and anyway, I'm not brown!  
**DOG.** Get over it, Cow! That's life.  
**A.** I've got an idea, Cow. (A whispers to **THE**.)  
**THE.** Change of plan, everybody! Dog goes after Brown, and Cow goes after me. (**DOG** and **COW** swap places.)  
**DOG.** “The cow slyly nips a brown dog.” No! You can't do this to me!  
**COW** (beaming). Thank you, A.  
**DOG.** I'll never live it down on the farm! Besides, I'm not brown, either – I'm black.  
**ALL THE OTHER CHARACTERS.** Get over it, Dog!



illustrations by Leon Mackie

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some places where information and ideas are implicit and where students need to make inferences based on information that is easy to find because it is nearby in the text and there is little or no competing information

some compound and complex sentences, which may consist of two or three clauses

other visual language features that support the ideas and information, for example, text boxes or maps

Reading standard: by the end of year 4

## Possible curriculum contexts

### ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 2 – Ideas: Show some understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

### ENGLISH (Writing)

Level 2 – Ideas: Select, form, and express ideas on a range of topics.

### Possible reading purposes

- To enjoy (and present) an amusing play
- To learn about the parts of a sentence in a fun way.

See [Instructional focus – Reading](#) for illustrations of some of these reading purposes.

### Possible writing purposes

- To use the text as a model for writing a play
- To explore some of the ways sentences can be structured
- To explore and use character development in writing.

See [Instructional focus – Writing](#) for illustrations of some of these writing purposes.

## Text and language challenges

### VOCABULARY:

- Possibly unfamiliar words and phrases, including “characters”, “paddock”, “milking shed”, “definite article”, “nips”, “cruelty”, “honoured”, “consider”, “insulting”, “quite superior”, “definitely”, “indefinite”, “huff”, “crafty”, “cunning”, “slyly”, “satisfied”, “beaming”, “Besides”
- The words that indicate parts of speech: “definite article”, “sentence”, “noun”, “verb”, “indefinite article”, “adverb”, “adjective”; and the punctuation term “full stop”
- The use of colloquial and informal language: “Yep”, “off now”, “could do with”, “might as well”, “make it up to you”, “Get over it”, “Hang on a second”, “Mind your manners”, “my game”, “That’s life”, “live it down”
- The use of puns: “How do you moo”, “indefinite sort of guy”.

### Possible supporting strategies

Students should already know the terms for sentence parts. Review these briefly before reading. For students who have not encountered the terms “definite article” and “indefinite article”, clarify these and explain the differences between their specific and general meanings. If necessary, introduce examples showing the other meanings of certain/sure and uncertain/unsure.

Some students may need support to understand the use of colloquial language and the puns. Provide opportunities for them to hear and read the expressions and to explore and identify their meanings.

*The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction*, pages 39–46 has useful information about learning vocabulary.

### SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED:

- Knowledge of the main parts of speech in their own and others’ spoken and written language
- Knowledge of the features and purposes of a play script
- The setting (farm with cows and a milking shed) and the animals found there
- Familiarity with stories in which animals are speaking characters
- Ability to connect the abstract idea of characters as parts of speech.

### Possible supporting strategies

Spend time reviewing students’ knowledge of the parts of speech and how words work in simple sentences. As described above, you may need to explain the terms used for “a” and “the” and how they are different.

If necessary, ask students to share their knowledge of a dairy farm, including the roles of different animals. You could use images or audiovisual clips to introduce this context.

### TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE:

- The structure and features of a play, including a list of characters, the setting (scene), and the stage directions
- The abstract idea of parts of speech as characters
- Simple, compound, and complex sentences
- Incomplete sentences
- The points of view of the characters
- Repetition of “Get over it” for effect
- Connections and definitions within the text, for example, “say what you’re nipping” followed by “We could do with another noun” and “We need some colour. Let’s have an adjective.”
- The use of “this thing” to refer to the sentence
- The construction, “Gave me quite a fright, it did.”
- The comeuppance for Dog when the sentence is rearranged at the end.

### Possible supporting strategies

If students are not familiar with reading, performing, or viewing plays, start with a play that has regular people or animals as characters. Students can work together to identify the features of plays. You may wish to chart these and ask students to identify each feature as they read the play.

During or after reading, ask students to find the places where each part of speech is introduced and the way the part is explained. They can record each part and its explanation in a table.

It may be useful to note that “the comeuppance for Dog” illustrates which items can change their order and keep the sentence grammatical – and change the meaning. (That is, you can’t say “cow brown a”, because they have a fixed order. But nouns can be subjects or objects, and other things too)

# Instructional focus – Reading

English (Level 2 – Ideas: Show some understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.)

## Text excerpts from “Making a Sentence”

THE. I’m making a sentence.  
You’re the second word.

DOG. “The dog.” That’s not a sentence. I mean, what do I do?

THE. You’re right, Dog. We need a verb.

NIPS (*enters and stands next to DOG*). Hi, everyone. I’m Nips.

DOG. “The dog nips.” Yep, that sounds right to me. Good sentence.

## Students (what they might do)

*The students make connections between their knowledge of plays and the text to understand who the speakers are and what they do. They ask and answer questions to infer the abstract idea that the characters are parts of speech. They draw on nearby information (“We need a verb”) and their vocabulary knowledge to further infer that “nips” is both a verb and the name of a character. They predict that the addition of the verb “nips” will complete the sentence.*

*Students make connections between the text and their knowledge of sentence structure to confirm that “The dog nips” is a simple sentence.*

*Students use their prior knowledge of punctuation to confirm the construction of the sentence. They make connections between the text and what they know of behaviour to make inferences about the character of COW.*

*The students combine information in the text with their knowledge of the uses of “a” and “the” to infer that “a” is a general (indefinite) term and “the” is a specific (definite) term.*

NIPS. That makes a sentence – “The dog nips a cow.”

COW. Wait a moment! I consider that rather insulting. I’ve got nothing against A, you understand, but I’m not just any cow. My milk is quite superior. We need a word to say it’s definitely me we’re talking about, and not some other cow. The cow, if you please.

A. Sorry cow, but I can’t help it. I’m just an indefinite sort of guy. Maybe I can make it up to you later.

NIPS. Hang on a second, Dog. I’d like to know how I nip. Lightly? Suddenly?

THE. You’re right, Nips. An adverb would be useful.

SLYLY. (*enters, stands between DOG and NIPS, and waves*). Hello, everybody. I’m Slyly.

DOG. “The dog slyly nips a cow.” That’s me – crafty and cunning!

*Students make connections within the text. With support, they integrate information about the role of adverbs (“how I nip”) and the examples given (“That’s me – crafty and cunning”) to understand the meaning of “slyly”. They infer that adding this word changes the meaning of the sentence by describing how DOG nips.*

## METACOGNITION

- Which strategies helped you most as you read this play? Can you explain how you used them and why?
- How did the way the author explained things help you? Show me where this happened.
- Does visualising the play being acted help you understand it? Give me an example of how this helped you.

## Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

**DIRECT** the students to read the text on page 3, pausing when Nips enters.

**ASK QUESTIONS** to check the students’ understanding.

- Which characters have you met so far? What have you learnt about them?
- What is THE trying to do?
- Why does DOG say it’s not a sentence?
- What does “nips” mean? What part of speech is it?
- What do you predict will happen now? Why do you think that?

**DIRECT** the students to read on by themselves and check their predictions.

- What do you predict will happen? As you read, continue to make and check your predictions.

**ASK QUESTIONS** to help the students identify the issue.

- Why is COW complaining? How is “a cow” different from “the cow”?

**MODEL** this distinction by showing how “a child” is not the same as “the child”.

- Try this yourselves: work with a partner to show how “a” and “the” give different meanings to nouns such as “book”, “holiday”, “school”, or “car”.

**EXPLAIN** that these words are known as articles because they precede a noun.

**ASK QUESTIONS** to elicit the opposite meanings of “definite” and “indefinite”.

- Why does A say he’s “an indefinite sort of guy”? What does he mean?
- How would a “definite” person act?

If necessary, provide further explanation or modelling to clarify the different meanings of these words.

- Sometimes we talk about a general thing (such as a book, a friend, a storm), and other times, we talk about a very specific thing (such as the maths book, the friend you played with at lunchtime, the storm last week).

**PROMPT** the students to find other examples that show the difference between a specific or general item, person, or event, then check that they understand how to use the articles “a” and “the”.

**ASK QUESTIONS** to clarify the role of adverbs and the meaning of “slyly”.

- What does NIPS want to know? Why?
- How is an adverb useful? What might “slyly” look like?
- What does “slyly” tell you about DOG and how he might nip COW?
- When else might you say someone behaved slyly?
- What other adverbs could describe how DOG nipped COW?

For students who would benefit from exploring adverbs of manner (this type of adverb), you could play a game of charades as a class or in groups. Prepare two sets of cards: one set of actions (wash the dishes, ride a bike, and so on) and one set of adverbs. Have the students take turns to select an action and an adverb, then act the two out so that the others can guess the action and the adverb.

**GIVE FEEDBACK**

- Reading parts of the text aloud with a partner helped you to understand what the author wanted the characters to do.

 Reading standard: by the end of year 4

 The Literacy Learning Progressions

 Assessment Resource Banks

# Instructional focus – Writing

English (Level 2 – Ideas: Select, form, and express ideas on a range of topics.)

## Text excerpts from “Making a Sentence”

Scene: A paddock behind a milking shed. THE enters.

THE. Hi, folks, I'm THE. I'm a definite article, and I'm going to make a sentence. First, I need a noun after me. Frog? ... Log? ... Bog? ... I know! Dog! (THE whistles.)

DOG. (*enters and stands next to* THE). Hello, I'm Dog.

I was hurrying those lazy cows to the milking shed, but suddenly there was a whistle and now I'm here.

COW. (*in a huff*). I very much hope so.

DOG. Get over it, Cow! Let's finish this thing and get back to work!

DOG. OK, OK, OK! “The dog slyly nips a brown cow.” Satisfied at last, Cow?

THE. Change of plan, everybody! Dog goes after Brown, and Cow goes after me. (DOG and COW swap places.)

DOG. “The cow slyly nips a brown dog.” You can't do this to me!

COW. (*beaming*). Thank you, A.

DOG. I'll never live it down on the farm! Besides, I'm not brown either – I'm black.

ALL THE OTHER CHARACTERS. Get over it, Dog!

## Examples of text characteristics

### FEATURES OF A PLAY

- List of characters
- Scene description
- Use of upper case for names
- Use of italics and parentheses for stage directions
- Direct speech
- Mostly present tense.

### COMPOUND SENTENCES

A compound sentence connects two or more clauses with connectives such as “but” or “and”. The clauses can each stand alone, but when put together, they expand the meaning by signalling connections between ideas.

### CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Authors of plays show what characters are like through the words they use and the way they speak, and they also give stage directions for their expressions or actions.

### WORD ORDER

The order of words in a sentence follows grammatical “rules” in order to make sense. Some words can be rearranged, but others cannot.

### METACOGNITION

- What was the most difficult part of putting your ideas into writing?
- Why did you choose this format? What others did you consider and why didn't you use them?
- What changes did you need to make after reading your play aloud? Is this a strategy you would recommend? Why?
- What did you do when you were not sure how to make a correct sentence?

## Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)

**ASK QUESTIONS** to help the students think about their ideas and how they will translate them into writing.

- Would a play be a good way to express your ideas? Why?
- Are your ideas tricky to explain to your audience? If so, is there a different form that would make it simpler?

If students will be writing plays, review the features of a play. Provide a selection of graphic organisers to support writing, for example, a simple plot outline, a template for planning a play, or a web diagram to record ideas.

**MODEL** the way a compound sentence is constructed. Write the sentence on a chart, and ask the students to indicate the three clauses and the connecting words.

- How do you signal the connections between ideas in your writing?
- Work with a partner to find a place where ideas can be connected into a compound sentence.
- Have you connected too many ideas in one long sentence? Try out some different ways of putting your ideas together. Which way works best for you?

**ASK QUESTIONS** to support the students as they develop their characters.

- Did you think about the characters you would use to convey your ideas?
- How can creating different characters help to create tension or drama?
- Read your work with a buddy, and talk about how you've shown what each character is like.
- How does each character speak? How can you show that?
- How does each character show their feelings? Do you need to tell the actors what to do to show this?

**DIRECT** the students to experiment with word order.

Ask volunteers for sentences from their writing. Write each word from a sentence onto large cards, and have students stand in a line holding the cards up while others read them in order. Encourage the students to try different arrangements to find out which changes make sense and sound right and which do not.

- What kinds of words HAVE to go together?
- Which words can be changed around?
- Why do you think this is so?
- How do you check to make sure your words are in the right order?

If necessary, model saying sentences aloud to check that they sound right. Remember that your use of this type of strategy is always based on what you know about the students' prior knowledge. For example, asking an English language learner if a word or sentence sounds right will not be useful if they don't have enough knowledge of English vocabulary, sentence structure, and common usage. Even if they are at one of the upper stages of English language proficiency, they may not be able to answer intuitively. In this case, explanations and further examples will be more effective.

Support the students to develop some sentence frames, such as Article + adjective + noun + adverb + verb + noun.

### GIVE FEEDBACK

- This plan shows me you've thought about how to turn your idea into a play.
- The stage directions and dialogue show me how the characters speak and act. They will help the actors know how to get your ideas across to your audience.

Writing standard: by the end of year 4  
The Literacy Learning Progressions