

# Collecting Thoughts and Dollars: Four Steps to Effective Writing for Child Support Workers



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# Collecting Thoughts and Dollars: Four Steps to Effective Writing for Child Support Workers

## Preamble

### Introduction

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**Resources** The information in this presentation is drawn from these three books:

- John Langan, *English Skills*, 8th ed., McGraw-Hill, 2006
- Sarah E. Skwire and David Skwire, *Writing with a Thesis*, 9th ed., Thomson, 2005
- Charlene Tibbetts and Arn Tibbetts, *Strategies: A Rhetoric and Reader with Handbook*, 5th ed., Longman, 1997.

In addition, you may find these websites helpful:

- The Purdue University OWL (Online Writing Lab), <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>
- University of Ottawa Writing Centre's HyperGrammar site, <http://www.uottawa.ca/academic/arts/writcent/hypergrammar/grammar.html>

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## Introduction, Continued

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### Goals

During our work today you'll meet the following goals:

1. Tacitly evaluate your current writing habits or processes
  2. Learn the four steps and four bases for effective writing
  3. Learn a system to eliminate punctuation and grammar errors as you write
  4. Apply the four steps to
    - Plan your writing
    - Write more effectively
  5. Apply the four bases to
    - Evaluate and revise your writing
    - Practice responding to others' writing
  6. Increase your confidence in your writing
- 

### Objectives: 4 Steps to Writing

By the end of our work, you'll be able to

1. Clearly state your point or purpose for writing
  2. Support your point with specific evidence
  3. Organize and connect the specific evidence
  4. Write clear, effective, error-free sentences.
- 

### Objective 4: “Sentence Skills”

As part of writing clear and effective sentences, you'll be able to

- Classify the information units in any sentence
  - Use information units as a guide to punctuation
  - Vary your sentence structures (patterns of information units)
  - Revise sentences for brevity and clarity
-

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## Preview: Attitudes, 4 Steps, and 4 Bases

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### The Importance of Attitude

Take a moment to consider these statements and your previous experiences with writing. Do you agree with any of these views? If so, circle the number of the statement.

1. "Good writers are just naturally talented. They're born, not made."
  2. "I've always had trouble with writing, and that's not likely to change."
  3. "Good writers plan ahead and include plenty of time for editing and revising."
  4. "No one has complained about my writing, and I'm satisfied with the way I write."
  5. "Good writers can write a perfect letter from start to finish in 15 or 20 minutes."
  6. "I need the pressure of a deadline to write well. I put off writing tasks until the last possible minute."
  7. "Good writers have had a lot of practice."
- 

### Two Key Attitudes about Writing

According to John Langan (*English Skills*, 8th ed., McGraw-Hill, 2006), effective writing, like so many other endeavors, depends on one's attitude. Adopting these two attitudes is crucial for writing effectively:

1. Writing is a skill that can be learned.
  2. Writing is a process of continuing discovery.
- 

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## Preview: Attitudes, 4 Steps, and 4 Bases, Continued

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### Writing Is a Skill

Too many people still believe good writing is the result of natural talent or creative inspiration and thus cannot really be taught. These people both excuse and hamper themselves with the idea that they just don't have what it takes to write well or that they'll never be able to learn.

Writing is a skill that anyone can learn with practice, but this practice takes time, effort and patience. Remember, too, that any skill can always be increased or enhanced; there's no ultimate, empyrean level of "world-class champion writer," no one with nothing left to learn about writing. (Every audience or reader is a little different, after all.)

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### Writing Is a Process

Too many people also believe that good writing can be produced quickly and easily (by those talented and fortunate few) or quickly and frantically (under the duress of a looming deadline).

But writing is a process—usually a nonlinear process. Good writing doesn't just happen in one sitting, in a few minutes (or hours or days). Often you may need to write for a while before you understand for yourself what you need or want to say. I still recall writing a college term paper (yes, at the last possible minute) in which I announced a clear thesis on the first page. By the time I got to the conclusion, though, I'd changed my mind! The paper was due the next morning...so I rewrote the first page to match what I said at the end.

Effective writers learn to allow plenty of time for editing and revising important documents—and even e-mails can be important. (As Miss Manners says, e-mails can be printed "and produced in court.")

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### Four Steps to Effective Writing

Langan asserts that anyone can write effectively by following these four steps:

1. Start with a clearly stated point.
  2. Support the point with specific evidence.
  3. Organize and connect the specific evidence.
  4. Write clear, error-free sentences.
- 

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## Preview: Attitudes, 4 Steps, and 4 Bases, Continued

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### **Four Bases to Evaluate Writing**

Too many people also still believe that good writing cannot really be evaluated objectively, that judging the quality or effectiveness of a piece of writing is completely subjective, even idiosyncratic.

But as Langan also asserts, the four steps to writing can be restated as four bases (or principles) with which to evaluate writing:

1. Unity
    - Is the point clearly stated?
    - Does all supporting material relate to the point?
  2. Support
    - Is there specific evidence to support the point?
    - Is there enough evidence to support the point?
  3. Coherence
    - Is there a clear method of organization for the support?
    - Are there transitions and other connective devices?
  4. Sentence skills
    - Are serious errors (fragments, run-ons) eliminated?
    - Is punctuation correct?
    - Are sentences varied?
    - Have needless words been removed?
-

## Exercise: Five Writing Tasks

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**Comparison Exercise (Groups)** Use the handout called “Preview...Comparison Exercise” and follow the instructions in it.

When you’ve finished, we’ll take a few minutes to discuss your choices.

---

## Step 1: Start with a clearly stated point

### What makes a point?

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#### Topic + Attitude = Point

A clearly stated point consists of two parts:

1. **Topic:** the subject or purpose of the communication
2. **Attitude:** the idea, opinion, or issue to be explained in the communication

Albany is a **beautiful city**.

---

#### A point is not a fact

A fact is valid or invalid, accurate or inaccurate, but it cannot be argued, discussed, explained, or supported. These statements are facts and do not make a point:

- ~~Gray parrots may live 75 years or more.~~
  - ~~New York's PEP for 2006 is 81%.~~
  - ~~New York's PEP has remained nearly constant for the past several years.~~
  - ~~New statuses have been added to CSMS.~~
- 

#### A point is not an announcement

Similarly, an announcement of one's topic or purpose does not advance an idea to be supported. The following statements provide no clear idea of the writer's attitude or stance about the announced topic.

- ~~I am writing to inform you about changes in policy.~~
  - ~~The subject of this letter is the addition of new status codes.~~
  - ~~This presentation will deal with best practices in support collection units.~~
- 

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## What makes a point?, Continued

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### A point must clearly state an opinion

The following sentences state opinions that could be explained or supported:

- Gray parrots **make surprisingly affectionate pets.**
  - New York's PEP **has remained steady for several reasons.**
  - New York's PEP **can easily be increased by taking these steps.**
- 



### Topic + attitude

In the sentences below, underline the attitude twice. (Work in pairs or in your group if you like.)

1. The Multiple Document Data Capture project will enhance the child support program in several ways.
  2. Changes in the 2008 Tax Refund Offset process will have significant effects on arrears collection.
  3. Conversion of banking services from a manual paper process to online reporting offers several distinct advantages to local districts.
  4. All child support enforcement staff must conform to the following provisions regarding confidentiality of information.
  5. Crediting of overpayments of child support must be handled using precisely controlled procedures.
- 

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## What makes a point?, Continued

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### Add some attitude

Rewrite the “announcement” sentences on page 11; add attitudes to make them clearly state a point.

(1) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(2) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(3) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## “Try-see”: Stating a point

---

**Your draft,  
Step 1:**

**Write 5  
points**

It's time to get started on your own work! Choose one of these options:

- Write 5 unique points (5 sentences with 5 different topics and attitudes) —OR—
- Write 5 points for the **same topic** (5 sentences with the same topic but 5 attitudes)

**Tip:** For practical benefit, choose topics related to your job: An e-mail you need to send; a request for equipment or travel; an explanation of policy; a potential solution to a current problem.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  4. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  5. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 

**Choose your  
best to share**

Choose your best sentence to share with the group.

---

 **Exercise: Childhood memory**

**What makes  
a happy  
memory?**

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Think now of an especially happy occasion from your childhood.

List what you remember best about the occasion.

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Then briefly share the occasion and one thing you remember about it with your group.

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 **Exercise: Childhood memory**, Continued

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**“The palest ink”—  
Memory and  
details**

A Chinese proverb says, “The strongest memory is weaker than the palest ink.” It’s true that writing something down can help us remember information we might otherwise quickly forget.

But it’s likely you remembered quite a few specific details about the happy occasion—sights, sounds, smells, tastes—without ever writing anything down. The specific sensory details are very likely what preserved the memory for you.

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## Step 2: Support the point with specific evidence

### Specific support

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#### Writing vs. talking

The same kinds of specific details that preserve memories for many years are absolutely necessary for effective **written** communication. If you make an assertion while speaking to a good friend, she may nod and agree, because she can see from your face that you're sincere, or because she's already familiar with you and your beliefs, or because she just doesn't want to put you on the spot by asking "How can you say that?"

Because readers may not know you and cannot see or hear you, they have no reason to accept what you say or to do what you ask. It's up to you to provide solid evidence for your point. The more specific your support, the more clearly and persuasively you can make your point, even to strangers—who may then approve your funding.

---

#### Support must be specific

Specific details illustrate ideas efficiently and clearly. Consider the two sets of supporting information for the following point:

The prices at the amusement park were **outrageously high**.

Food cost twice the supermarket price

Log flume cost \$10 per person and lasted only about 3 minutes

Food was poor quality

8-ounce Coke cost \$4

Rides cost a lot

Hot dog cost \$6

Had to limit rides

The set on the right has specific details that let you judge the park's prices for yourself. For instance, in New York's Capital District, a typical vending machine soft drink is 20 ounces and costs \$1.25, while a 12-ounce can of soda may cost 75 cents.

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## Specific support, Continued

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### Support must be specific

In the previous example, most of the specific details happen to be numbers, perhaps the easiest way to provide specific evidence. Consider these sets of support for the following point:

### (Part Deux)

Speaking before a group is **a problem for many people**.

React with stage fright; stammer; blush

If forced to speak, may develop physical symptoms

Feign illness to avoid

Go to any length to avoid

Often ranked in surveys as worst fear—more feared than death

Uncomfortable even at the thought

Here there are no numbers at all, but the set on the left is more specific. “Stammer” and “blush” are definite “physical symptoms.” “Feign illness” is more specific than “Go to any length”; “more feared than death” is more specific (and dramatic) than “Uncomfortable....”

---

### Tips for specific details

Thinking in terms of specific details takes determination, effort, and patience, but the result—better communication—is guaranteed. Follow these tips to make support specific:

- Use numbers, including dates and times
  - Give proper names (persons, places, brands, models)
  - Include direct quotations where appropriate
  - Describe exact behaviors (type, mail, check, click)
  - Add sensory information (color, size, shape, sound, texture)
- 

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## Adequate support

**“Enough!—  
or Too  
Much”**

The qualities of “specific” and “adequate” support overlap to some extent. Specific support is usually adequate, while support that isn’t specific won’t be adequate, either.

Outlining or numbering your supporting details or examples may help reveal inadequate support. If you have only one or two items, you probably need several more. The poet Blake’s exclamation applies beautifully to supporting evidence: “Enough!—or Too Much.” In my experience at least, it’s extremely rare for writing to have too much specific support and far too common not to have enough.

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**Adequate  
support is  
relevant**

Specific details that do not relate directly to the topic may also cause support to be inadequate (as well as to violate the principle of “unity” or one point). Including the wrong (irrelevant) information very likely means that you don’t have enough of the right information. Be sure that every detail or fact you include relates directly to your point.

---



**Complaint  
Letters**

Look again at the complaint letters from the Comparison exercise.

Is Letter A’s support adequate?    Yes    No

Is Letter B’s support adequate?    Yes    No

Why does Letter B not mention what was wrong with the coffee table?

---



## “Try-see”: Supporting details

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### Your draft, Step 2

Choose 1 of the 5 points you wrote and **list** at least 5 supporting details for it, more if you can. Don't worry about writing complete sentences for now; just **list** specific details.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_
  4. \_\_\_\_\_
  5. \_\_\_\_\_
- 

### Share with partner or group

Share and check your list with your partner or group.

- Is your support specific?
  - Is your support adequate?
-

## Step 3: Organize and connect the specific evidence

### Use a clear method of organization

---

#### **Two basic orders**

For most workplace writing, one of two basic orders can be used:

1. Time (chronological), as events happen, and
2. Emphatic (importance), most important last.

Complex discussions may use a combination of time and emphatic order, but most writing tasks are clearly suited for one of these orders.

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#### **Time order**

Time or chronological order is used for these types of writing:

- Processes or procedures (steps to follow)
  - Sequences of events (15 days to appeal; decision within 30 days)
  - Descriptions of workflows
  - Narrations (case histories)
- 

#### **Emphatic order**

Emphatic order (order of importance, with most important item last) is often used for these types of writing:

- Rankings (hierarchical information)
  - Presenting an argument or position
  - Justifying purchases or expenses
  - Comparing brands or vendors
- 

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## Use a clear method of organization, Continued

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Look again at your Comparison handout.

### Order in the paired samples

Which order is used for the more effective piece in each set? Put a “T” for “time,” an “E” for “emphatic,” or a “B” for “both” in the blanks beside each sample in the list below.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Babysitter Ad B
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Directions Set B
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Thank-You Note A
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Complaint Letter B
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Reply A
-

## Connect the specific evidence

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### **Four ways to make connections**

Most people are used to certain transition words and phrases, but there are at least three other ways to connect sentences for a smooth “flow” of thought. These are the four types of connections:

1. Transition words and phrases
  2. Repeated key words
  3. Synonyms for key words
  4. Correct pronoun use
- 

### **Transition words for different relationships**

Transition words and phrases indicate various types of relationships between ideas. Below are classes of relationships and examples of common transitions:

- Time: before, first, second, next, when, while, after, later, finally
  - Addition: first, for one thing, another, also, in addition
  - Contrast: but, however, yet, otherwise, still
  - Logic (cause): thus, because, since
  - Illustration: for example, for instance, once, such as
  - Conclusion: therefore, consequently, thus, then, as a result
  - Space: next to, across, below, behind, nearby
- 

### **Repeated key words**

You may have been warned about repetition, but strategic repetition of key words (usually words related to the topic) can subtly but neatly tie your sentences and paragraphs together.

Look, for instance, at how many times the more effective reply to the complaint letter uses the word “apology,” “apologize,” or “mistake.”

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## Connect the specific evidence, Continued

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### **Synonyms for key words**

You can also connect sentences with synonyms for key words (again, usually words related to the topic).

Notice the synonyms for “apologize” and “mistake” in the more effective reply: “sorry,” “regrets,” “errors,” “go wrong.”

---

### **Proper pronoun use**

Finally, correct pronoun use can tie sentences together while avoiding clumsy repetition.

Notice the use of “we” in the more effective reply. Notice, too, how many times “you” is used in the less effective complaint letter, compared to the more effective complaint.

---





## “Try-see”: Organize and connect your support

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**Your draft,  
Step 3A:  
Order**

Number your list of supporting details in the appropriate order.

Which order did you choose and why?

---

**Step 3B:  
Connections**

Add transitions as needed to your support.

*Et voilà!* You now have a draft. (Note, please, that you haven't yet had to write a complete sentence except for your point.)

---

**Share and  
check your  
draft**

Show your draft to your partner or group members. Check for the first three bases:

1. Unity: One point; nothing irrelevant in the support
  2. Support: Specific and adequate
  3. Coherence: Clear order; appropriate transitions
-

## Step 4: Write clear, error-free sentences

### Step 4A: Think of sentences as information units

---

**Definition:** You may remember a traditional definition for a sentence:  
**What makes a sentence?** “Sentences are made up of a subject and a predicate.”

But Charlene and Arn Tibbetts (in *Strategies: A Rhetoric and Reader*) define a sentence from this less grammarian-centered perspective:

**Sentences are made up of units of information.**

This definition is the starting premise for a simplified alternative to traditional discussions of sentence structure. The definition is especially practical, too, in that it provides the basis for a system to plan, write, and punctuate sentences *all at the same time*. As the Tibbetts insist, punctuation is a structural part of writing, not a decoration you add after you’ve finished writing.

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**Two types of information units** According to the information-unit system, all sentences are made up of one or more of these two types of information units:

1. Base unit: Essential information (required)
2. Free unit: Supplemental information

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## Step 4A: Think of sentences as information units, Continued

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**Base unit** A base unit has these characteristics:

- Can stand alone
- Always states a complete thought
- Contains the essential information or meaning for the sentence
- Must be present in every sentence

Child support helps children.

---



**Base unit**

Underline the base unit in the following sentences:

1. When a custodial parent applies for temporary assistance, she or he must cooperate with the child support agency.
2. Otherwise, if the parent does not cooperate, she or he may lose benefits.
3. Child support workers are, for the most part, careful and attentive to detail.
4. The noncustodial parent, that is, the parent who does not live with the child, may be ordered to pay child support.
5. Every child deserves the support of both parents, even if the parents don't live together.
6. Many states require child support to be paid until the child is 18 years old, longer if the child is still in high school.

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## Step 4A: Think of sentences as information units, Continued

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### Free unit

A free unit has these characteristics:

- Cannot stand alone
- Never states a complete thought
- Not grammatically necessary, but
- Provides supplementary information
- Gives variety and rhythm to sentences
- May be placed in different positions in relation to the base unit

who live with single parents

---

### Three types of free units

Based on their position in the sentence, free units can be classified into three types:

1. Opener: Before the base unit
  2. Interrupter: Inside the base unit
  3. Closer: After the base unit
- 

### Opener: Before base unit

These sentences use openers before the base unit:

“Feelin’ down and dirty, feelin’ kinda mean, I go from one to the other extreme.”

When a custodial parent applies for temporary assistance, she or he must cooperate with the child support agency.

Otherwise, if the parent does not cooperate, she or he may lose benefits.

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## Step 4A: Think of sentences as information units, Continued

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### Interrupter: Inside base unit

These sentences contain interrupters within the base unit:

Child support workers are, for the most part, careful and attentive to detail.

The noncustodial parent, that is, the parent who does not live with the child, may be ordered to pay child support.

The custodial parent, however, may provide health insurance for the child.

---

### Closer: After base unit

These sentences contain closers after the base unit:

“Saturday night I was downtown, workin’ for the FBI.”

Every child deserves the support of both parents, even if the parents don’t live together.

Many states require child support to be paid until the child is 18 years old, longer if the child is still in high school.

---

### A base unit contains essential meaning

What seems to be supplemental information in a sentence may not be a free unit. A base unit contains the essential information and meaning for a particular sentence. What appears to be extra information may actually be required or essential for the meaning of that particular sentence. Here the sample base unit and free unit are combined into a sentence that is still one base unit:

Child support helps children who live with single parents.

The “who live...” part isn’t required for a complete thought, but it is required for the desired meaning of this particular sentence.

Why is there no punctuation in this sentence? Read on.

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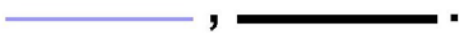


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## Step 4A: Think of sentences as information units, Continued

### Marks to set off free units

The following punctuation marks separate free units from their base unit:

- comma [ , ]                      
- dash [ — ]                        
- parentheses [ ( ) ]                

Of course, the comma is used far more often than the dash or parentheses. While commas are also used in lists or series, commas almost always mark free units.

### Sentence “pointers”: Time, cause, contrast, etc.

What the Tibbetts call “sentence pointers” are basically transition words and phrases indicating various types of relationships:

- Time: before, while, next
- Logical relation: thus, because, since
- Similarity and contrast: like, but, yet
- Count or differentiate: first, then, finally

These words and phrases may either be free units by themselves (“Finally,” “for example,” “however”), or they may signal the beginning of a free unit (“Because he hated the opera”). Therefore, commas almost always accompany sentence pointers to set off the free unit.

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## Step 4A: Think of sentences as information units, Continued

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### **“The Rhetoric of Sentence Units”**

*Rhetoric* is defined as the “art of effective speaking or writing.” The Tibbetts speak of “the rhetoric of sentence units” to emphasize just how much of the structure, correctness, and effectiveness of your sentences is an art—art that you can create and shape as you wish, that you choose and control. You can choose the way you structure your ideas into information units and sentences that support your point and achieve your purpose for writing. You can also virtually guarantee that your sentences are clear and correct.

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### **The Four Techniques of the “Sentence Unit Rule”:**

The Tibbetts’ “Sentence Unit Rule” for writing forms a summary of the information-unit system and the art of writing clear, effective sentences. The rule is not so much a rule of law but a set of techniques or practices to follow when you write sentences. The four techniques are as follows:

1. Break up your sentences into clearly defined units.
  2. Use punctuation to show where the units begin and end.
  3. Use sentence pointers to predict ideas.
  4. Vary your units; avoid repeating the same patterns over and over.
-





## “Try-see”: Write and punctuate

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**Your draft,  
Step 4:  
Complete  
sentences**

Working from your organized draft, complete the following tasks:

1. Write and punctuate at least three complete sentences. Can you justify the punctuation you chose?
  2. Underline the base unit in each of your sentences.
  3. Label any free units you have (opener, interrupter, closer)
-

## Step 4B: Avoid serious errors

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### **Two grievous sentence errors**

Because certain sentence errors suggest that the writer doesn't even know what a sentence is, these errors are considered much more serious than simply a misplaced comma. Each error is punctuated incorrectly as a single sentence. These two serious errors are

1. Sentence fragment: Not a complete thought
  2. Run-on sentence (comma splice): Two or more complete thoughts incorrectly "run together" with a comma
- 

### **Two ways to correct a sentence fragment**

A sentence fragment can be corrected in one of two ways:

1. Join the fragment to an adjacent base unit
2. Add words to make the fragment a base unit (a complete thought)

We'll practice with our sample free unit:

who live with single parents

### **(1) Join the fragment to a base unit**

The first way to correct a fragment is to join it to a base unit:

Child support helps children who live with single parents.

---

### **(2) Add words to make a complete thought**

The second way to correct a sentence fragment is to expand it into a complete thought, adding words so that it becomes a base unit:

Children who live with single parents often need child support.

---

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## Step 4B: Avoid serious errors, Continued

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### Three ways to correct a run-on sentence

Run-on sentences, or comma-splices, represent the other serious sentence error. Whereas a fragment is less than a sentence, a run-on is two sentences or more jumbled together. Run-on sentences can be corrected in one of these three ways:

1. Separate the base units into two or more sentences with a period
  2. Use a semicolon between the base units (still 1 sentence)
  3. Use a comma and conjunction between the base units (still 1 sentence)
- 

### (1) Separate sentences with a period

Perhaps the simplest and most obvious way to correct a run-on sentence is to separate the base units into two or more sentences with a period between them.

**Child support helps children who live with single parents. These parents may still need temporary assistance.**

---

### (2) Use a semicolon between base units

Another (and perhaps more sophisticated) way to correct a run-on sentence is to place a semicolon between the base units.

**Child support helps children who live with single parents; these parents may still need temporary assistance.**

Note that this method can make for long sentences! It's best for two base units that are relatively short and whose information is closely related.

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## Step 4B: Avoid serious errors, Continued

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**(3) Use a comma + conjunction:  
and / but /  
or / for / nor**

The third way to correct a run-on sentence is to join the base units with a comma plus the appropriate conjunction.

Only these conjunctions can be used with a comma to join two base units:

- and
- but
- or
- for
- nor
- so
- yet

Child support helps children who live with single parents, **but** these parents may still need temporary assistance.

Child support helps children who live with single parents, **yet** these parents may still need temporary assistance.

---

## Step 4C: Revising sentences

### Four ways to revise sentences

In addition to avoiding serious errors, Langan suggests four ways to revise sentences to avoid less serious errors or to improve clarity:

1. Use parallelism
2. Choose specific words
3. Use concise wording
4. Vary sentence length and type

### Use parallelism

Parallelism applies to items in a list or series; these items should be consistent in structure or form. Compare the following sentences:

#### Not parallel

The bacon was fatty, grease was on the potatoes, and the eggs were cold.

Filled with talent and ambitious, Eduardo plugged away at his sales job.

#### Parallel

The bacon was fatty, the potatoes were greasy, and the eggs were cold.

Talented and ambitious, Eduardo plugged away at his sales job.

### Use specific words

The specific details that support your idea also make your sentences more effective. Here is a review of ways to make sentences specific:

Exact names	Jackie loves her new Honda Civic GX NGV.
Lively verbs	The garbage truck rumbled down Front Street.
Adjectives	That tiny, silver-haired woman is a karate expert.
Sensory words	The elevator lurched, and the door clunked open.

*Continued on next page*

## Step 4C: Revising sentences, Continued

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### Use concise wording

Sentences (and letters and...) don't have to be long to be effective. Eliminate unnecessary words wherever you can; your readers will thank you.

How would you shorten these sentences?

- Anne is of the opinion that the death penalty should be allowed.
  - Ben finally made up his mind after a lot of indecision and decided to look for a new job.
  - The proposal for carrying out the self-study has been redesigned to facilitate more closely with ongoing strategic planning processes and to capitalize on pre-existing data.
- 

### Vary sentence length and type

A short sentence placed between two longer ones can have an especially dramatic effect. Try it! Here is a list of ways to vary sentences:

- Combine two or more base units to make one long sentence (use ; or , **and** | , **but** | , **or** | , **for** | , **nor** )  
Child support helps children who live with single parents; these parents may still need temporary assistance.
  - Use one or more free units with a single base unit  
Even with the help of child support, single parents may need temporary assistance.
  - Use a short, one-base-unit sentence for emphasis  
Child support helps children. When \$1.46 billion is distributed to single parent families, the benefits to these families are clear.
  - Use lists or series instead of separate sentences  
Single parents can be helped by receiving child support, temporary assistance benefits, and job training.
-



## “Try-see”: Revise your sentences

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**Your draft,  
Step 4C:  
Revising  
sentences**

Change the unit pattern of at least one sentence from your draft. Is the new pattern more effective?

Is there a sentence that isn't as clear or concise as you would like? Revise it and then ask your partner or group members for advice.

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# Summary and Checklists

## The Four Steps and the Four Bases

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### **Four Steps to Effective Writing**

The four steps to effective writing are

1. Start with a clearly stated point.
  2. Support the point with specific evidence.
  3. Organize and connect the specific evidence.
  4. Write clear, error-free sentences.
- 

### **Four Bases to Evaluate Writing**

The four steps to effective writing can be restated as the four bases to evaluate writing:

1. Unity
  2. Support
  3. Coherence
  4. Sentence skills
- 

### **“Finally,....”**

You probably haven't heard anything new. But you should have a draft that you can actually use when you get home. Less tangible but perhaps more important, you've become acquainted with the two key attitudes that will help you write more efficiently and more effectively for any purpose:

1. Writing is a skill that anyone can develop with practice.
  2. Writing is hard work for almost everyone; it's a process that takes time and effort to do well.
-



## Checklists for writing

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### Langan's Four-Base Checklist

1. Unity
  - Clear opening statement of the point?
  - All material related to the point?
2. Support
  - Specific evidence?
  - Enough [or too much] evidence?
3. Coherence
  - Clear method of organization?
  - Transitions and other connective devices?
4. Sentence skills
  - Fragments and run-on sentences eliminated?
  - Correct punctuation?
  - Effective, concise wording?
  - Sentences varied?

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*Continued on next page*

## Checklists for writing, Continued

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**Luebbert's  
10 questions  
for self-  
evaluation**

1. How much time did you spend on this writing task? How many rough drafts or revisions did you make?
2. What point are you trying to develop in this writing?
3. Who will need to read this writing? Is it appropriate for their background/skill level/interests?
4. How is this writing organized? Are your transitions and connections clear and smooth?
5. Where do you think this writing is effective? What did you do to make it so?
6. Where do you think this writing may be weak or unclear? What might you do to strengthen or clarify it?
7. Have you read this writing aloud to anyone? Has anyone else read this writing?
8. Have you carefully proofread this writing yourself? Do you believe you have corrected all errors?
9. Are your sentences clear and effective? Have you used a variety of sentence lengths and types?
10. Rate this writing from 1 to 5, according to your usual work. (If it's what you usually do, it's a 3.)

If it's better than your usual effort, what did you change for this writing?

If (God forbid) it's worse, what went wrong? How might you revise this writing now and/or avoid this problem in the future?

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## Preview of the Four Steps and Four Bases: Comparison Exercise

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### 5 Pairs of Writing Samples

On the following pages, you will find the following five pairs of writing samples (from *Writing with a Thesis*, 9th ed., by Sarah E. and David Skwire):

1. Babysitting ads, such as one might see on a supermarket bulletin board
  2. Directions to a rural campground
  3. Thank-you notes (for a graduation gift)
  4. Complaint letters (to a furniture store)
  5. Replies to a complaint letter
- 

### Instructions

Take a few minutes to read and discuss the samples in your group. Then for each pair complete these two activities:

1. Choose the piece you believe is more effective.
  2. List several reasons to justify your choice (i.e., to support your point). Be ready to share your choices and reasons with the whole group.
-

## Two Ads on the Community Bulletin Board

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**Ad A**

## Babysitter

Experienced high school student available, weekdays to midnight, weekends to 2 AM. Reasonable rates. Call Sandy, 335-0000.

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**Ad B**

## Babysitter

A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT WHO KNOWS *THE THREE R'S*

*Ready*—any weekday to midnight, weekends to 2 AM.

*Reliable*—four years' experience, references available.

*Reasonable*—\$4.00 per hour, flat fee for more than five hours.

Call Sandy, 335-0000.

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**Choice for  
Babysitter  
Ad**

Ad \_\_\_\_\_ is more effective because:

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. \_\_\_\_\_
-

## Two Sets of Directions

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### Set A

How to get from town to Camp Wilderness

Take Freeway west to Millersville Road exit. Go north on Millersville Road to Route 256. West on 256 to Laurel Lane. North on Laurel Lane until you see our sign. Turn right, and you're there.

---

### Set B

How to get from town to Camp Wilderness

You'll have an easy trip if you avoid three trouble spots:

1. You have to take the MILLERSVILLE ROAD exit as you go west on the Freeway, and it's a left-hand exit. Start bearing left as soon as you see the "Millersville 5 miles" sign.
2. After turning north (right) on Millersville Road, don't panic when you see Route 526. You want ROUTE 256, and that's 8 more miles.
3. Go west (left) on Route 256 to LAUREL LANE. The street signs are almost impossible to read, but Laurel Lane is the second road on the right after the Mobil station.

Once on Laurel Lane, you're all set. Go 2 miles until you see our sign. Turn right, and you're there.

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### Choice for Sets of Directions

Set \_\_\_\_\_ is more effective because:

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. \_\_\_\_\_
-

## Two Thank-You Notes

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**Note A**

Dear Aunt Molly,

“Thanks for everything” is an old, old phrase, but I’ve never meant it more. Thanks for your generous, great big check. Thanks for coming to the graduation ceremonies. Thanks for years of hugs and funny comments and good advice. Thanks for caring so much for me, and thanks for being Aunt Molly.

Much love,

*Alice*

---

**Note B**

Dear Aunt Molly,

Thank you so much for your generous check. I was really happy that you could come to my graduation, and I hope you had a good time. Thank you so much again.

Much love,

*Alice*

---

**Choice for  
Thank-You  
Notes**

Note \_\_\_\_\_ is more effective because:

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. \_\_\_\_\_
-

## Two Letters of Complaint

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**Letter A**      August 23, 2007....

Maybach Company...New York, NY 10001

I have tried calling three different times and have not received any satisfaction, so now I am going to try writing.

I have absolutely no intention of paying any \$749.60. I returned my coffee table more than a month ago. One of the legs was wobbly, and the top had a bad scratch. Two times the pickup men did not come on the day they said they would. I returned the first bill for the table, and now you just sent me another one, and all I get from people when I call the store is "We'll look into it." Also, the price was \$174.96, not \$749.60. I await your reply.

Yours very truly,

*Augusta Briggs*

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*Continued on next page*

## Two Letters of Complaint, Continued

**Letter B**

August 23, 2007....

Maybach Company...New York, NY 10001

When you folks make mistakes, you don't kid around. You make big ones. Phone calls haven't done me much good, so I'm hoping that this letter can clear things up.

Early last month—probably July 9 or 10—I returned a defective coffee table. Since you had no more in stock, I canceled the order.

When the bill came for the table, I returned it with a note of explanation. Exactly one week ago, August 16, I received a second bill. To add to the fun, this second bill was for \$749.60 instead of the original \$174.96.

When I called the store, I was told I'd be called back by the next day at the latest. I'm still waiting.

I'm sure you agree that these are too many mistakes, and that they are big enough to be extremely annoying. Shall we get this matter settled once and for all?

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

*Augusta Briggs*

**Choice for Complaint Letters**

Letter \_\_\_\_\_ is more effective because:

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. \_\_\_\_\_



## Two Replies to a Letter of Complaint

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**Reply A**      August 26, 2007....

Dear Ms. Briggs:

We apologize. We made a lot of mistakes, and we are truly sorry.

We tried to phone you with our apology as soon as we got your letter of August 23, but you weren't at home. Therefore, we're taking this opportunity to apologize in writing. We also want to tell you that your bill for the coffee table has been canceled once and for all, and you won't be bothered again. If something else should go wrong, please call me directly at extension 4550.

Good service makes happy customers, and happy customers are the heart of our business. We appreciate your letting us know when our service isn't so good, and we want to assure you that we've taken steps to see that these mistakes don't recur.

Again, please accept our sincere regrets. Do we dare call your attention to the storewide furniture sale all of next month, including an excellent stock of coffee tables?

Yours very truly,

*Rose Alonso*

Manager

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*Continued on next page*

## Two Replies to a Letter of Complaint, Continued

**Reply B**

August 23, 2007....

Dear Ms. Briggs:

Persuant to your letter of August 23, please be advised that your bill for the returned coffee table has been canceled.

This department attempted to phone you immediately upon receipt of your letter, but no answer was received.

We apologize for any inconvenience you may have experienced, and we hope that we may continue to deserve your patronage in the future. There is a storewide furniture sale all of next month in which you may have a special interest.

Yours very truly,

*Rose Alenso*

Manager

**Choice for Replies to Complaint Letter**

Reply \_\_\_\_\_ is more effective because:

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. \_\_\_\_\_