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Game On! How Sentence Structures Shape Instruction and Learning in Board Game Manuals

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates sentence patterns and types in board game rule books for educational purposes. The background highlights the importance of clear instructional language in rule books, which are practical non-academic texts that can support English language learning by exposing students to varied sentence structures and types. The objectives are to identify and classify sentence patterns and types in board game rule books in conveying rules and instructions effectively. A qualitative descriptive research design is employed, using purposive sampling of selected English-written rule books from educational board games. Data collection is through documentation of sentences from key rule book sections, focusing on grammatical structure. Sentence patterns follow Quirk et al.'s (1985) seven-pattern framework and sentence types which are classified as simple, compound, complex, and compound complex. The findings reveal that the sentence patterns identified include Subject-Verb, Subject-Verb-Object, Subject-Verb-Complement, Subject-Verb Object-Adverbial, Subject-Verb-Object-Object, Subject-Verb-Object Complement, and Subject-Verb-Object-Adverb, covering the full range proposed by Quirk et al. Sentence types found en-compass simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In instructional communication, particularly in written forms such as manuals and guides, sentence structure plays a vital role in ensuring clarity and effectiveness. Whether the purpose is to inform, direct, or warn, selecting appropriate sentence patterns and types is essential for successful communication. A sentence pattern refers to the arrangement of grammatical elements, such as the subject, verb, object, and modifier that make a sentence structurally coherent. These patterns can be adapted to serve different functions, which are categorized as sentence types. Structurally, sentences may be classified as simple,

compound, complex, or compound-complex, while functionally they are categorized as declarative, interrogative, imperative, or exclamatory.

Various patterns and types of instructional sentences are frequently encountered in daily life, such as in board games which is recognized as effective learning media for improving students' English skills, as stated in the study by Sitanggang et al. (2023). In understanding the gameplay, players rely on a rule book that contains essential instructions to ensure the game proceeds properly and follows its rules. For example, in the 'Cascadia' board game rule book, the sentence "Habitat Tile must show the matching wildlife" has "Habitat Tile" as the subject, "must show" as the main action, and "the matching wildlife" as the object. It is a declarative sentence that functions as a rule or instruction, indicating an obligation players must follow during gameplay.

However, the ability of understanding English texts is still relatively low, as mentioned in Suhaila et al. (2025). This weakness also affects the development of other skills, especially writing, which needs knowledge of various sentence forms to create clear and well organized texts. Furthermore, Hidayah et al. (2024) found that "the students still faced difficulties in writing skills like procedure text and the students have to improve their ability in writing skills." A clear understanding of such patterns makes it easier to identify the performer of the action, the required action, and the intended target of that action.

Although sentence patterns are frequently taught in detail within grammar and writing courses, they are rarely examined in non-academic contexts. Yet, instructional texts, such as board game rule books, are highly prevalent in daily life and can be both valuable and practical for English language learning. In fact, many students still face difficulties in comprehending and especially in forming sentences properly, largely because they are not well acquainted with sentence patterns (Kusnadi et al., 2024). This challenge is often compounded by learning materials, particularly in reading and writing, that remain overly focused on monotonous academic or formal contexts, thereby limiting students' exposure to diverse sentence constructions.

This issue is also reflected in the context of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University, where students are generally more exposed to academic texts such as essays and reports, but rarely to non-academic instructional texts. As a result, many students encounter difficulties when interpreting practical written instructions in English and when constructing their own procedural texts. To address this, exploring sentence patterns and types in functional and engaging contexts, such as rule books, merits further investigation.

This study will provide a new perspective by combining the analysis of sentence patterns and types within a corpus of board game rule books, For instance, the instruction 'Select a Habitat Tile and Wildlife Token' in the Cascadia board game is arranged by the implicit subject, verb, and object which has a simple sentence type. Recognizing the frequent use and functional role of imperative sentences can help students quickly grasp the intended meaning of texts and reduce ambiguity. Such an understanding is also expected to enhance students' reading comprehension skills and their ability to produce instructional texts, both in daily life and in academic contexts. Therefore, this research will

focus on identifying the sentence patterns and types used, in conveying rules within board game rule books.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach, as it emphasizes understanding phenomena through detailed description of sentence patterns and types in board game rule books rather than numerical data. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem.

Since the implications of this research are relevant to education, the type of board games considered is educational board games. More specifically, the selected board game will employ mechanics such as card drafting, dice rolling, set collection, hand management, area majority, and point-to-point movement, as these mechanics are frequently found in educational board games according to Acar & Güler (2025). Furthermore, one board game is selected as the data source, namely Wingspan. This board game is selected not only because of the mechanics but also based on additional criteria, including high ratings on the Board Game Geek platform and a complexity level categorized as easy to medium, making it suitable for students to play.

After finding the rule book as the data source, the next step is to collect the sentences based on the separated part of the rule book, such as the introduction, set up, overview, the four actions, bird powers, end of the round, and bonus cards. This step helps researcher to do the next stage, that is analyze the sentence pattern. The analysis is conducted based on the framework proposed by Quirk et al. (1985), which recognizes seven basic sentence patterns in English (SV, SVO, SVC, SVA, SVOO, SVOC, and SVOA). After the patterns are identified, each sentence is further classified into its respective sentence type. This classification follows the traditional categorization of sentence types based on structure in English grammar (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Sentence Patterns

Table 1. Sentence Patterns in Wingspan Board Game Rule Book

No	Patterns	Representative Sentences
1	SV	The player who has the most points[S] wins.[V]
2	SVC	Any excess beyond your egg limit[S] is[V] lost.[C]
3	SVO	This method[S] uses[V] the side of the goal board that has spaces for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place.[O]
4	SVA	Each habitat[S] focuses[V] on a key aspect of the growth of your aviary[A]
5	SVOO	Randomly[A] select[V] the first player[O] and give[V] them[O] the first-player token.[O]
6	SVOC	The board[S] has[V] 2 sides,[O] each using a different scoring method.[C]
7	SVOA	Each bird[S] extends[V] a chain of powerful combinations[O] in one of your habitats.[A]

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These representative sentences were taken from the analysis of each section in the Wingspan board game rule book. All basic sentence patterns are present. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the SVOA pattern is the most frequently used. This differs from the study conducted Andriani & Bram (2021), who found that the SVO was the dominant pattern. In addition, a research conducted by Kusnadi et al. (2024) also shows the difference. It reported that the SVA pattern was the most prevalent in their dataset. This contrast can be explained by the fact that the three studies examined different types of texts. The present research focuses on an instructional text, while the previous studies analyzed news articles and students' written work, which follow their own structural patterns and communicative norms.

On the other hand, the SV and SVOO pattern show the lowest frequency of use. Similarly, the research of Kusnadi et al. (2024) found that SV is the least pattern used in students' written work. In addition, the research of Andriani & Bram (2021) also shows a similarity regarding to the least used of SVOO pattern. The SV and SVOO patterns tend to deliver only essential information and do not always provide the additional context required in instructional or other text types. In comparison, San (2025) notes that SVA, SVO, and SVOA patterns are used more often because they give readers a clearer understanding of who performs an action, what the action involves, and what results from it. As a result, instructional and some text types tend to use patterns that provide clearer and more complete information, which explains why SV and SVOO appear less often and why more detailed patterns are preferred.

The first sentence in Table 1 exemplifies the SV pattern. Although the sentence contains only a subject and a verb, it is not a simple sentence. This is because the subject (S) is a noun phrase expanded by a relative clause that specifies which player is being referred to, while still functioning as a single grammatical unit. Lastly, the verb (V) expresses the final result of the game.

Next, the SVC pattern is represented by the second sentence. The subject identifies what the rule refers to. While the verb "is" serves as an auxiliary verb connecting the subject to its complement. The complement indicates the condition that applies to the subject. The auxiliary verbs used in this pattern are forms of be (are, is) and modal constructions (must be, can be). Although auxiliaries serve different functions within the verb phrase, they share one important syntactic role, namely their ability to function as operators when they appear as the first verb in a finite verb phrase (Quirk et al., 1985). This pattern also shows several variations through the presence of adverbs. Adverbs may occur at the beginning or the end of a sentence, and in some cases in both positions. The inclusion of adverbs helps add extra information, making the instructions more detailed and explicit. An example of an alternative pattern is "Also,[A] each egg on the bird cards on your player mat[S] is[V] worth 1 point[C] at the end of the game.[A]"

The third pattern is SVO. The subject identifies the procedure being explained, while the verb expresses the action performed. The object specifies what is used, with a

relative clause adding further detail about the object. Although the sentence follows a basic SVO structure, the expanded object provides additional information that clarifies the rule without altering the core pattern. The alternative form of the SVO pattern is (S)VO, in which the subject is omitted. This variation signals the use of imperative sentence forms, commonly understood as deriving from affirmative sentences through the omission of the second person subject (Levenston, 1969). An example of this pattern can be seen in the sentence, “Gain[V] the benefit of that slot[O].”

The fourth sentence shows the SVA pattern. The subject refers to the element being discussed, and the verb describes what it does. The adverbial phrase adds further detail by indicating the specific area that the action relates to. This pattern also appears in several alternative forms influenced by the flexibility of adverbials. An adverbial element may occur more than once in a single sentence, as in “Your options for which food to gain[S] are shown[V] on the dice[A] in the birdfeeder,[A] which will repeatedly get depleted and refilled throughout the game[A].” Adverbials may also appear at the beginning of a sentence, as illustrated in “In the case of a tie,[A] the player with the most unused food tokens[S] wins[V].” In addition, both variations can occur within the same sentence, where the subject is also omitted, as shown in “Instead,[A] wait[V] until the end of your turn[A] before refilling empty spaces[A] on the bird tray[A].”

The fifth is the SVOO pattern. This pattern only occurs once and appears alongside another pattern within a compound sentence, rather than standing alone, which can be seen in the table. The clause also represents the imperative form where the subject is omitted and implicitly understood as “you.” The verb “give” denotes an action of transfer, while “them” functions as the indirect object, identifying the recipient, and “the first-player token” serves as the direct object, specifying the item being transferred.

The sixth sentence follows the SVOC pattern. The subject identifies the game component being described, and the verb expresses possession. The object specifies what the board possesses, while the complement provides additional information that describes and clarifies the object. There are also alternative forms of this pattern, again influenced by the presence of adverbials. In some cases, adverbials appear at both the beginning and the end of the sentence, as shown in the example “If the dice in the tray all show the same face (including if there is only 1 die) and you are about to gain food for any reason,[A] you[S] may first throw[V] all 5 dice[O] back[C] into the birdfeeder[A].” The initial adverbial functions as a dependent clause expressing a condition under which the action applies, while the final adverbial “into the birdfeeder” serves as an adverb of place.

The last is the SVOA pattern. In the sentence of the table, the adverbial phrase functions as an adverb of place, indicating the location where the action takes place. As the most frequently occurring pattern, SVOA also appears in many alternative forms. One common variation is the (S)VOA pattern, in which the subject is omitted, reflecting the frequent use of imperative structures in instructional texts. In addition, SVOA sentences often contain more than one adverbial, and these adverbials may appear either at the beginning or the end of the sentence, further expanding the pattern. This variation can be seen in the sentence “If the slot where you placed your action cube shows an egg-to-card

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bonus conversion,[A] you[S] may discard[V] at most 1 egg[O] from a bird[A] on your mat[A] to draw an additional card.[A]" where multiple adverbials provide detailed conditions and locations for the action.

3.2. SENTENCE TYPES

Table 2. Sentence Types in Wingspan Board Game Rule Book

No	Types	Representative Sentences
1	Simple	Pay[V] the corresponding egg cost (if any)[O] by discarding eggs[A] from any birds[A] on your player mat.[A]
2	Complex	During each round,[A] players[S] take[V] turns[O]—proceeding clockwise[A]—until each player has used all of their available action cubes.[A]
3	Compound	For example,[A] you[S] might keep[V] 2 bird cards and 3 food,[O] or you[S] might keep[V] 4 bird cards and 1 food.[O]
4	Compound-Complex	If players tie,[A] place[V] both cubes[O] on the tied place,[A] and do not award[V] the next place.[O]

Among these types, simple sentences occur most frequently, followed by complex sentences, then compound sentences, while compound–complex sentences appear the least often. This finding contrasts with the study by Andriani & Bram (2021) which reported complex sentences as the dominant type in their data drawn from news articles.

The first sentence which is shown in Table 2 indicates a simple sentence. The structure consists of one finite imperative clause with the subject implicitly understood as "you." The phrase "if any" functions as an elliptical modifier rather than a full dependent clause and therefore does not add to the structural complexity of the sentence. The remaining phrases function as adverbials that explain how and where the action is carried out. Although the sentence includes several modifiers, it does not introduce any additional finite verbs, so it remains syntactically simple. As explained by Quirk et al. (1985), a sentence is not considered complex solely because it contains a complex noun phrase, since complexity at the phrase level does not necessarily result in complexity at the sentence level.

Meanwhile, the second sentence consists of one main (independent) clause and one subordinate clause which is defined as a complex sentence. The main clause, "players take turns," conveys the central action and is able to stand on its own as a complete sentence. This clause is further elaborated by several adverbial elements, including "During each round," which functions as a time adverbial, and "proceeding clockwise," a non-finite participial clause that describes how the action is carried out. The sentence is classified as complex because of the presence of the subordinate adverbial clause "until each player has used all of their available action cubes." This finite clause, introduced by the subordinating conjunction "until," indicates the condition or endpoint of the action stated in the main clause.

Next, the compound sentence type as shown in the third sentence. It is made up of two independent clauses connected by the coordinating conjunction "or." Each clause has its own complete subject–verb construction and describes a separate possible choice. The

introductory adverbial “For example” serves to introduce an illustration and does not influence the structural classification of the sentence.

The last sentence is classified as a compound complex sentence. It begins with the subordinate adverbial clause, which is introduced by the subordinating conjunction “if” and expresses a condition. This clause cannot stand alone and therefore functions as a dependent clause, while it is followed by two imperative main clauses, which are connected by the coordinating conjunction “and” to show that both instructions are equally important and should be carried out in sequence.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussions, the researcher found that the seven core sentence patterns based on the theory of Quirk et al. (1985) are identified in Wingspan board game rule book. Those patterns are SV, SVO, SVC, SVA, SVOA, SVOC, and SVOO. In addition, regarding the flexibility of adverbial element and the imperative form which typically omits the subject, several alternative sentence patterns appear. The alternative patterns include (S)VO, (S)VOA, (S)VOAAA, SVCA, ASVCA, SVAA, ASV, A(S)VAAA, SVCOA, ASVO, and ASVOAA. Among these, the total number of basic and alternative forms of SVOA occurs more frequently than others. The four structural sentence types, such as simple, compound, complex, and compound complex are also identified in the rule book. The simple and complex sentence type dominantly appear. By this finding, it shows that the rulebook language employs clear, directive structures, and easily followed gameplay instructions.

In terms of communicative function, the rulebook mainly uses directive and assertive speech acts. Directive acts tell players what actions they need to perform, helping ensure the instructions are clear and easy to follow. Assertive acts provide factual information about the game’s components, rules, and outcomes, helping players understand the context of each instruction. Together, these two functions make the rulebook effective in explaining the rules, guiding player actions, and supporting smooth gameplay.

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