

Save the Diagrams:

Why Students Need to Learn Sentence Diagramming

Posted by **Dawn Burnette** on October 18, 2020

I'm a huge proponent of sentence diagramming, but occasionally I meet someone who—usually due to a bad middle school experience—is adamantly opposed to the practice. I offer you this defense.

A Little History Lesson

Sentence diagramming is perhaps one of the oldest graphic organizers we have in language arts. In 1847, a school principal named Stephen Watkins Clark developed a bubble-looking type of diagramming to help his students see connections among grammatical concepts. About 30 years later, Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg, professors at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, tweaked the concept and made diagramming hugely popular as a way for students to see the structure of a sentence.

The Benefits of Diagramming

Like any other graphic organizer, diagrams can be tremendously helpful for visual and kinesthetic learners. Think of all of the words in a sentence as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. If you take all of the pieces out of the box and line them up on the table, you just see a bunch of disconnected pieces. But once you fit them together, you see the whole picture! Diagramming allows students to see the picture of the sentence.

Diagramming also requires critical thinking and reading comprehension. You have to analyze the sentence and understand what it really means to be able to figure out what modifies what and which words go together as phrases and clauses.

From an editing standpoint, diagramming helps us to figure out usage issues. Does that pronoun go in the indirect object spot? Then we must use the objective case. Do we need that preposition in the sentence? Only if you can find a place for it in the diagram. And diagramming helps us figure out parallel structure. If you aren't sure if parts are parallel, diagram the sentence and you will *see* the structure.

What Happened to All the Diagrams?

Unfortunately, in the 1960s, diagramming started to become less fashionable. Then in the 1980s, a national education association announced that diagramming actually prevented students from improving as speakers and writers, so the practice all but disappeared from classrooms. But why?

I have a few theories based on my own schooling during the 1980s (though I probably shouldn't have date stamped myself like that). First, some teachers required students to diagram for the sake of diagramming rather than using it as a *tool for critical thinking and analysis of*

structure. Additionally, some of these teachers focused so much on drawing the lines at the correct angles that they missed the point of the exercise.

Second, educational theorists came up with new ideas and had to push out the old ones in order to sell their books. And third, many teachers simply didn't like diagramming, and since English teachers tend to have a natural knack for writing, they often didn't (and still don't) understand why left-brained math and science students *need* the support that sentence diagramming offers.

Not by coincidence, students nationwide began to struggle with sentence structure (and analytical thinking if we are to be honest), and we are still seeing the effects of that struggle in our society.

What Do We Do Now?

Thankfully, teachers and parents are turning back to diagramming as a means to a greater end. And that's why **Daily Grammar Practice** includes diagramming as the final step of the weekly sentence analysis from grades 4-12 (and in the Latin and French series as well). Will diagramming automatically make students better writers without any other writing instruction? Of course not! But understanding how words fit together to create sentences helps make other writing instruction more meaningful.

Does sentence diagramming help every student? No one strategy is perfect for every learner, but plenty of brain research has proven the efficacy of graphic organizers. And my own experiences as a teacher have led me to believe that most students can use that help.