

Sentence Detective

Unpacking and Expanding Sentences with Function Question Cards

Skill Focus: Grammar and Syntax

This activity has two parts: **Sentence Unpacking** and **Sentence Expansion**.

These are listed together because they are partner activities:

- Sentence unpacking supports reading comprehension
- Sentence expansion supports writing

They can be taught individually or in conjunction. They both increase in complexity with each grammatical building block and syntactic structure you introduce to your students. The sentence examples are from a unit on plants as habitats, but you will choose a content area you are studying.

Planning for Instruction:

1. Select **sentences** that match the content knowledge from your classroom.
2. Select the **function question cards** you have previously taught.
3. Choose **Sentence Unpacking** or [Sentence Expansion](#).



Sentence Unpacking

Description:

The purpose of this activity is to help students improve their reading comprehension. They will unpack the meaning of a sentence using the function question(s): Who or What?, Did what?, Where?, Which one?, How many?, and What kind? You can write your sentences on your white board or type them and use our Sentence Detective Slide Deck to unpack your sentences.

Materials:

- Function question cards (select the questions you have taught your students)
- Sentence(s) to unpack from the content knowledge your students already know
- Sentence Unpacking Student Activity Sheet
- [Sentence Detective Slide Deck](#)

Teacher Tip: You will need to model each activity for your students before letting them work independently.

Instructions:

Say, "Today, we will use our function question cards to unpack the meaning of the sentence. Good readers are always making meaning as they read. Using the function questions can help us as we do that!"

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Unpacking and Expanding Sentences with Function Question Cards

Go through an example with your students.

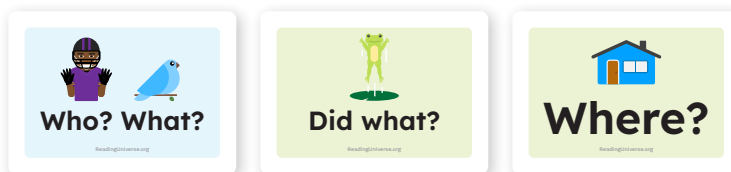
1. Display the function question cards that you will use to unpack the sentence, along with the sentence you will be working on.
2. Say, **"We will use our function question cards to unpack the meaning of the sentence. Who or what is this sentence about?"** Read aloud the sentence parts until you locate the who or what (subject). The students say, "The cactus."

Then say, **"What is the *who* or *what* (subject) doing? The cactus *did what*..."** Read aloud the sentence parts until you locate the *did what* (predicate).

The students say, "grows."

Model Sentence 1

Use these question cards:



The cactus grows in the desert.

Follow the same steps with each function question that is represented in the sentence.

3. Repeat with model sentence 2.

Model Sentence 2



At dawn, the hummingbird flutters on the cactus bloom to drink the nectar.

4. Students may work with a partner or individually to answer the function questions to unpack sentence meaning using the [Sentence Unpacking Activity](#).

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Sentence Expansion

Description:

The purpose of this activity is to help students build an expanded sentence, starting with a basic sentence — "Who or what?" (subject) and the predicate "Did what?". Students will use the function questions as a guide. Students will ask and answer one function question at a time to expand the sentence. The first function questions are: When? Where? Why? How? Which one? How many? What kind? You can write your sentences on your white board or type them and use our Sentence Detective Slide Deck to unpack your sentences.

Materials:

- Function question cards (select the questions you have taught your students)
- Sentence(s) to expand from the content knowledge your students already know
- Sentence Expansion Student Activity Sheet
- [Sentence Detective Slide Deck](#)

Instructions:

Say, **"Today we will build sentences. We will start with a simple sentence — one that answers who or what did what. We will use our function question cards to help us build the sentence."**

Go through an example with your students.

1. Display the simple sentence containing: who or what (subject) and did what (predicate).
2. Say, **"Let's read this sentence."** Read the sentence aloud together. Then ask, **"Who or what is this sentence about?"** Have students answer.

Next, say, **"Let's use our function question cards to help us build our sentence."**

3. Go through each function question you've selected, asking the question, having students brainstorm answers, making decisions for sentence structure, and then record the answer in the [Sentence Expansion Student Activity Sheet](#) at the end of this packet.

Remember, you will need to have a conversation to discuss how to place these parts in this order, not the order in which the questions came.

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Unpacking and Expanding Sentences with Function Question Cards

4. Read the expanded sentence together.

Model Sentence 1

The woodpecker bores.	
 Where?	in the cactus
 When?	early in the morning
 Why?	to make a nest

Expanded sentence:

Early in the morning, the woodpecker bores in the cactus to make a nest.

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Unpacking and Expanding Sentences with Function Question Cards

Note: discuss other ways this sentence can be put together.

5. Repeat with model sentence 2.

Model Sentence 2

The cactus blooms.	
	in the desert
	when it is ten years old
	the cactus under the palo verde tree
	the prickly cactus
The cactus blooms in the desert when it is ten years old the cactus under the palo verde tree the prickly cactus.	

Note: Discuss other ways this sentence can be put together.

The rearranged sentence to match book language.

When it is ten years old, the prickly cactus in the desert under the palo verde tree blooms.

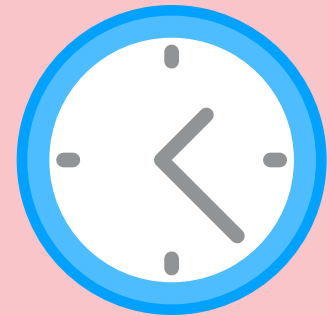


Grammar Function Cards

These cards guide students in unpacking meaning and building sentences by examining the function of words and phrases within them. Each prompt directs students to consider how meaning and grammatical purpose work together, supporting reading comprehension and sentence writing. Ideal for whole-class discussions, small-group instruction, or individual support.

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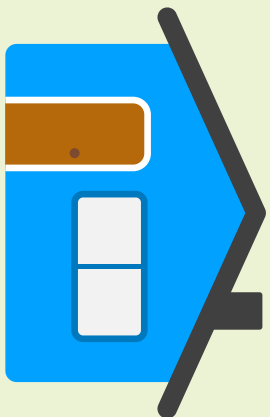
When?





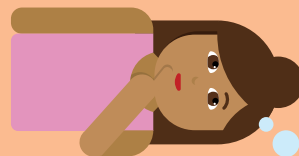
Where?

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How?

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Quickly



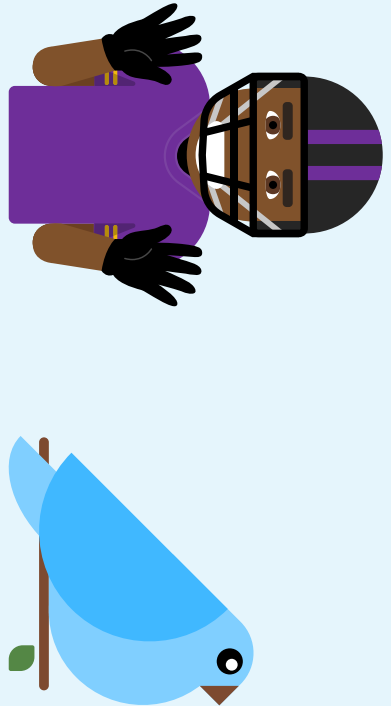
Why?

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Who? What?

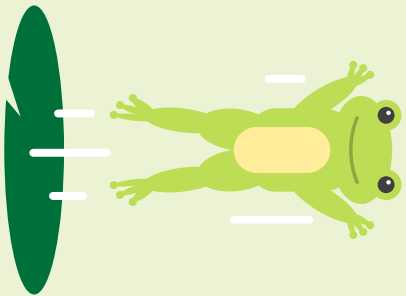
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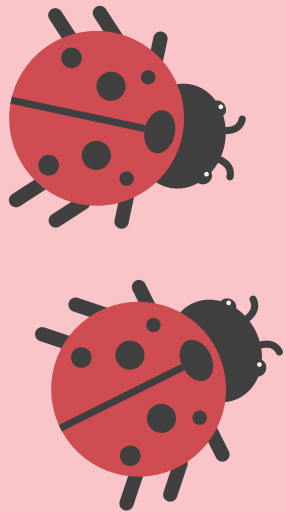
Did what?

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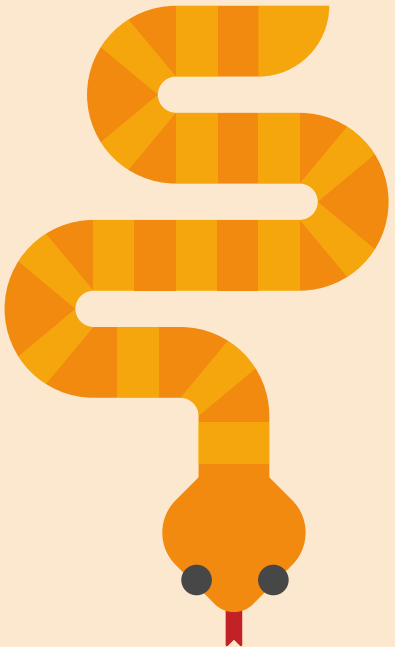
How many?

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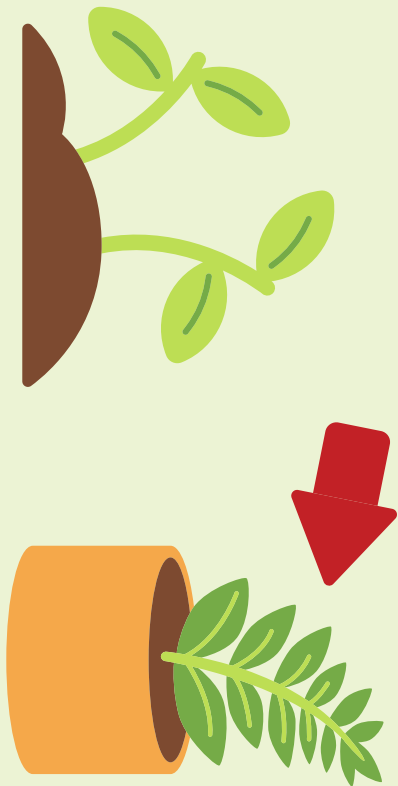


What kind?



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Which one?



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Name _____ Date: _____

Sentence Unpacking Activity



Who? What?



Did what?



Where?

Sentence



Who? What?



Did what?



When?



Where?

Sentence



Who? What?



Did what?



When?



Where?



Why?

Sentence

Name _____ Date: _____

Simple sentence:

_____?

_____?

_____?

_____?

Expanded sentence:

