

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?

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

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:



Who? What?



Did what?



Where?

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



Who? What?



Did what?



When?



Where?



Why?

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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Unpacking and Expanding Sentences with Function Question Cards

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?

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

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.

4. Read the expanded sentence together.

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Unpacking and Expanding Sentences with Function Question Cards

Model Sentence 1

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

Expanded sentence:

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

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

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5. Repeat with model sentence 2.

Model Sentence 2

The cactus blooms.	
 Where?	in the desert
 When?	when it is ten years old
 Which one?	the cactus under the palo verde tree
 What kind?	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.



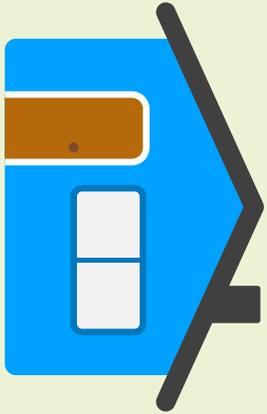
Grammar in Action: Sentence Function Question Cards

These question 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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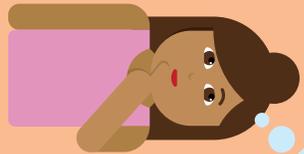
When?





Where?

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Quickly

How?

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Why?



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A purple rounded rectangular card with the word "Why?" in large, bold, black font. To the right of the text is a white question mark inside a purple circle. At the bottom left, the text "ReadingUniverse.org" is written vertically.

Who? What?

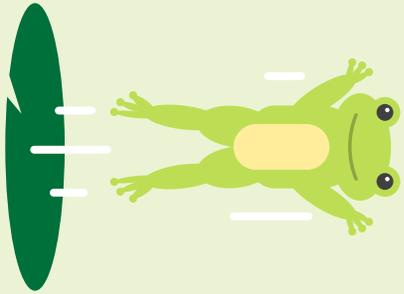


ReadingUniverse.org

A light blue rounded rectangular card with the words "Who? What?" in large, bold, black font. To the right of the text are two illustrations: a football player in a purple jersey and a blue bird perched on a branch. At the bottom left, the text "ReadingUniverse.org" is written vertically.

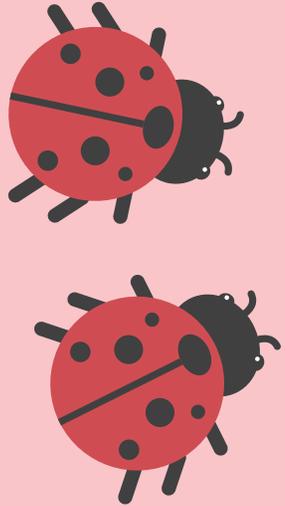


Did what?

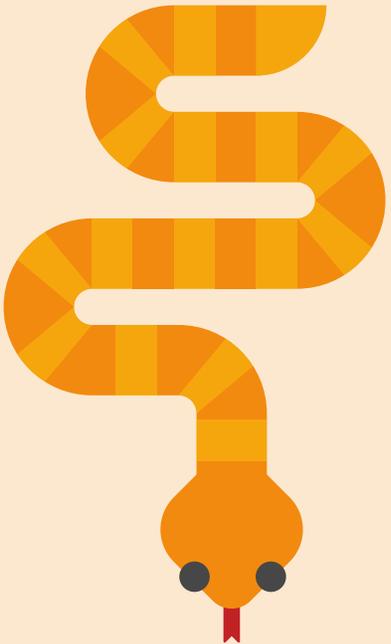


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How many?

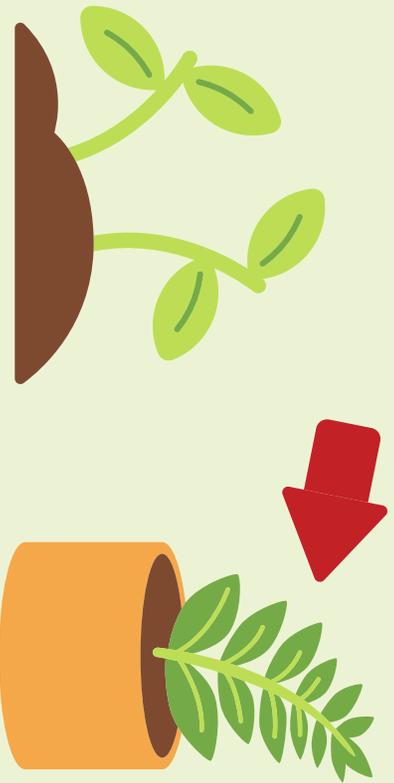


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What kind?

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Which one?

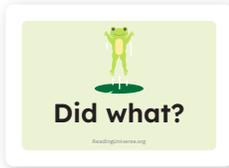
ReadingUniverse.org

Name _____ Date: _____

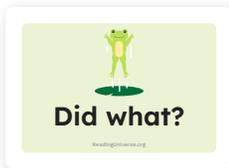
Sentence Unpacking Activity



Sentence



Sentence



Sentence

Name _____ Date: _____

Simple sentence:

_____?

_____?

_____?

_____?

Expanded sentence:
