

# Sentence Blank Fillers—A Writing Activity

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Language is never acquired or used in a vacuum. Rather, it is part of the way in which a language user explores and describes the world he lives in. Through communicative use of the language, a student of English as a second language (ESL) not only learns about English but also about the world. Well-planned writing assignments are one way a teacher can help ESL students learn to interact effectively, directly or indirectly, with others in the English language.

This article briefly illustrates one way of preparing a writing exercise that requires the student to make a considerable amount of effort in completing it. Exercises of this type met with success when tried out in ESL classrooms at the Language Center, National University of Malaysia. The intellectual and often very creative contributions that the ESL students have to make to the exercise have so far proved to be highly motivating and stimulating.

### Control and Freedom

Basically, the exercise involves "filling in the blanks," not with words but with sentences of the student's choice. For the most part, students are required to provide linguistic material of their own rather than merely juggling what is provided. On the one hand, the students are controlled by fairly detailed instructions and the large amount of context provided. On the other hand, the student is unable to run through the written tasks automatically since he has to provide something original himself.

### Levels

The exercises are not graded and in fact can be used by both intermediate and

advanced level students. The only difference between the two levels will be the quality of the responses expected from the students. For less proficient ESL writers, of course, the exercises would have to be adapted, using more simplified language, shortening the paragraphs, and/or providing more contextual information.

### Example Exercises

Three examples of how this exercise can be prepared follow.

Example exercise one uses two short paragraphs. Generally, every other sentence has been replaced by a blank. Occasionally, however, this rule is violated to preserve particularly important sentences in the paragraph.

Example exercise two differs from the first one in that parenthetical vocabulary items follow some of the blanks. These are to be included in the sentences the students write.

The third example exercise illustrates the use of a longer passage with more contextual information provided by a greater number of sentences between blanks.

### Example 1

#### FREE CHOICE SENTENCE BLANK FILLERS

Instructions:

In the paragraphs given below, each blank represents ONE SINGLE SENTENCE. Fill in the blanks with sentences of your own choice, ONE SENTENCE PER BLANK. The sentence

you choose must fit the preceding and following sentences and the text as a whole.

Paragraph 1:

It was a typical gloomy Monday morning at school. \_\_\_\_\_ We had to have the lights on in the classroom. \_\_\_\_\_ Mrs. Bright, our English teacher, was two or three minutes late. \_\_\_\_\_ Suddenly, Zainal said: "\_\_\_\_\_." We all agreed to ask Mrs. Bright when she came in. We chose Anna Lee, the prettiest student, to make the suggestion to her. \_\_\_\_\_ She looked pale and tired. \_\_\_\_\_ She smiled and reflected a moment. \_\_\_\_\_ She shook her head and said: "\_\_\_\_\_." We protested in vain. \_\_\_\_\_ Finally, Mrs. Bright said: "If you really want to invite me out, you can do so after the class." \_\_\_\_\_

Paragraph 2:

When I opened the door, the delivery boy handed me a slip of paper and a package. \_\_\_\_\_ The package was square-shaped. \_\_\_\_\_ It sounded rather like an alarm clock. \_\_\_\_\_ This thought possibly frightened me more than I cared to admit. \_\_\_\_\_ The more I looked at it the more dangerous it seemed. \_\_\_\_\_ My heart beating faster, I put my ears close to the package but still could not hear anything. The silence was awful. \_\_\_\_\_ As I ran, I could hear my heart pounding. \_\_\_\_\_ From this position I listened for the inevitable explosion. \_\_\_\_\_ I was still there when my father came home. When he came up to me, he was holding something in his hand. \_\_\_\_\_ He had opened the package to find it inside. \_\_\_\_\_

Example 2

FREE CHOICE  
SENTENCE BLANK FILLERS  
(with some vocabulary items given)

Instructions:

Each of the following blanks represents ONE SINGLE SENTENCE. Fill in the blanks with sentences of your own choice, ONE SENTENCE PER BLANK. The sentence you choose must fit the preceding and following sentences and the text as a whole. In some blanks, include the vocabulary items given in parentheses.

Two nights ago I had the fright of my life. \_\_\_\_\_ I spent most of the evening at Abraham's house watching a video program with his family. \_\_\_\_\_ (thriller) As a result I was fairly jittery by the time I was ready to leave Abraham's place. \_\_\_\_\_ (eventually) It was pitch dark. \_\_\_\_\_ (moon) The village street lights had all gone out at midnight. \_\_\_\_\_ (however) I have lived in this village for more than fifteen years. \_\_\_\_\_ I knew that I had parked my scooter by the second tree on the right of Abraham's house. \_\_\_\_\_ (groped for) When I came across the first tree I suddenly became aware of the old cemetery on my left. \_\_\_\_\_ (reminded) I almost felt as though I myself had become a participant in a horror movie. \_\_\_\_\_ There was total silence everywhere. \_\_\_\_\_ (my footsteps, echo) I continued to grope around in the pitch darkness. Where was the scooter of mine? \_\_\_\_\_ (nervous) My imagination began to work overtime. \_\_\_\_\_ Most of the village folks had been in bed for ages. \_\_\_\_\_ I moaned in pain. \_\_\_\_\_ I picked it up and tried to start it at once. \_\_\_\_\_ I tried again. \_\_\_\_\_ I cursed it under my breath. \_\_\_\_\_ Suddenly, the engine roared into life. \_\_\_\_\_ (the scooter's headlight) Instantly, I saw it in the spotlight. \_\_\_\_\_ He was near enough to touch me. \_\_\_\_\_ I backed the scooter away from him. \_\_\_\_\_ (the graveyard) I fled like a frightened bat out of hell on my machine, making so much noise I probably woke the whole village. \_\_\_\_\_ When I finally got home, I rushed to the kitchen to get a drink. \_\_\_\_\_ I told myself I was safe at home. \_\_\_\_\_ It was a long time before I got to bed. \_\_\_\_\_

**Example 3****FREE CHOICE  
SENTENCE BLANK FILLERS****Instructions:**

Each of the following blanks represents ONE SINGLE SENTENCE. Fill in the blanks with sentences of your own choice, ONE SENTENCE PER BLANK. The sentence you choose must fit the preceding and following sentences and the text as a whole.

Mr. Lim was a very fat man in his forties. \_\_\_\_\_ Its name was Brownie. \_\_\_\_\_ Naturally, the dog and its master looked rather similar. \_\_\_\_\_ Every evening, on weekdays they only walked down to the end of the road and back. \_\_\_\_\_ So Brownie was always delighted when weekends came around. \_\_\_\_\_ One Sunday evening, Mr. Lim and Brownie were on their usual walk when a group of five teenagers ran up to them and started to shout. "\_\_\_\_\_!" This certainly made both Mr. Lim and his dog very angry and embarrassed. \_\_\_\_\_ But unluckily for them, the teenagers outran them. \_\_\_\_\_ From that weekend onwards, the teenagers made a habit of teasing fat Mr. Lim and his dog.

However, Mr. Lim decided that he and Brownie had better pay more attention to their diet as well as increase their exercises. \_\_\_\_\_ The naughty teenagers, however, did not notice the change in their appearances. Two weeks later, on a Sunday evening, these teenagers ran out as usual and shouted their favorite insults at Mr. Lim and his dog. \_\_\_\_\_ They ran away laughing, thinking that Mr. Lim and Brownie would not catch them. \_\_\_\_\_ One of the teenagers suddenly felt Brownie's teeth fasten firmly on to his pants. \_\_\_\_\_ The other four teenagers stopped running and turned around in surprise. In the meantime, Mr. Lim ran up, calling out to his dog. \_\_\_\_\_ Finally, the five youngsters escaped. \_\_\_\_\_ Brownie stood watching them, a large piece of blue cloth in his mouth. He was wagging his tail in great delight. \_\_\_\_\_ From that day on, the five teenagers were never seen again when Mr. Lim and Brownie were on their walks down the street. The youngsters never tried their trick again.

**About the Author**

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