

## Sentence-level Learning: Order Matters



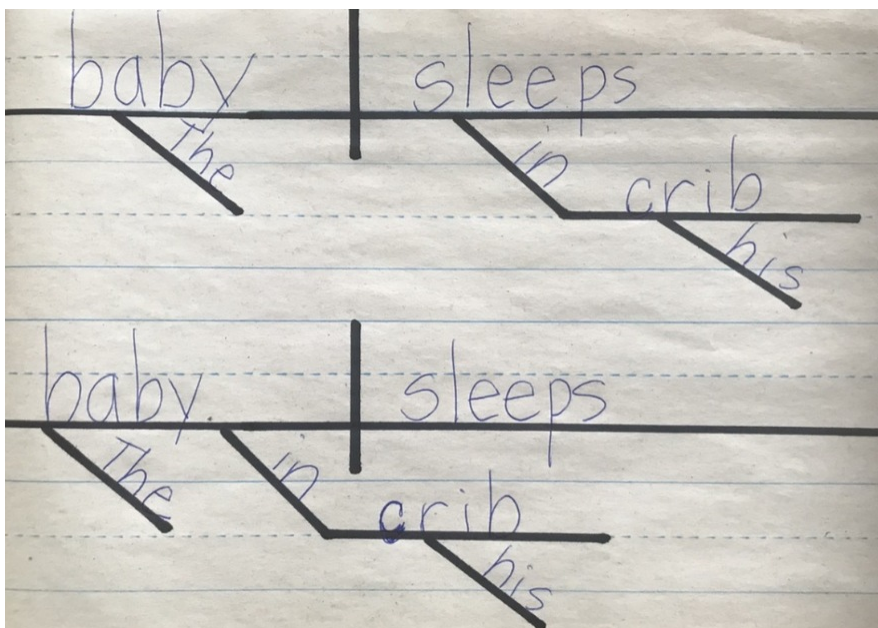
### Action (Verb) Expansion

Two simple activities, Action Expansion and [Namer Expansion](#), help students visualize and hear how sentences work.

### Order Matters: Seeing and Hearing the Way Words Work Together

Students develop syntactic awareness as they listen to, speak, read, and write sentences. As students become conscious of and reflect on the arrangements of words, they realize that word order impacts the meaning of the sentence.

This is illustrated in the video above of the [Action Expansion](#) activity. At about four minutes in, a student asks about word order. "Can the 'where' go before the action?"



In a sentence diagram, it is possible to concretely see the relationship of the words and phrases to the subject (noun) and the predicate (verb). Do these sentences mean the same thing?

### Diagramming Helps Students Make Sense of Sentences

To answer the student's question, we've [diagrammed](#) two different sentences. Where does the baby sleep? "The baby sleeps in his crib" (top) describes the picture students viewed.

Now let's move the "where" (in his crib) before the action (sleeps). This new sentence, "The baby *in his crib* sleeps" sounds awkward, as the teacher points out.

Changing the word order doesn't just interrupt the cadence of the sentence, however, it subtly changes its meaning. As shown in the bottom diagram, the positional phrase *in his bed* now expands the namer (baby) rather than the action (sleeps).

"The baby in his crib sleeps" answers the question "Which baby sleeps?" It differentiates *the baby in his crib* from *the baby on his mat*. Can you picture these two sleeping babies?

### Why Teach Syntax?

Beyond understanding the meaning of individual words, it is their order—when combined into a sentence—that conveys thought (Pinker, 1994). "As students learn to employ more complex sentences in their oral and written language, their ability to make sense of what they read increases, too" (Shanahan, 2014).

[Action Expansion](#) and [Namer Expansion](#) are two of the 23 activities in [Syntax: Knowledge to Practice](#). Can you envision using these expansion activities to help write a class story, report, or skit about animals, then have the class read it or perform it aloud? Get your sentence strips ready!



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