

# Sentence Surgery

By  
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If you think situations are involved and busy on the TV show *ER*, you would be amazed by the detailed operations that go on in my classroom. The students are my interns, and I am the Chief of Surgery. Together we operate on patients of the most unusual kind—paragraphs in poor condition and in need of repair. Throughout the school year, we fully evaluate our patients’/paragraphs’ problems, give them the utmost care, and do a fantastic job of getting them in good health.

I realized within my very first year of teaching that my students needed something to stimulate their interest in improving their writing skills, particularly in the area of revising and editing. My previous efforts to teach revising and editing, which was done aloud in front of class yielded very little student interest and attention. I also recognized that students were quick to correct one or two obvious errors in a paragraph, but overlooked the more serious problems.

My father is a physician, and I realized a connection between the care a surgeon gives to patients and the care that should be given to poorly written paragraphs. These paragraphs can benefit from sentence surgery. I explained this connection to my students, and they were immediately intrigued with this simile. Because they were so anxious to hear more, I was compelled to make a medical connection whenever possible. Revising and editing became an activity they actually looked forward to doing together as a class activity and in small groups.

In preparation for each sentence surgery, I give the students a prompt on which to write. I review the writing process as part of the instruction, and I guide them to include as many details as they can to completely expand on the prompt. I keep folders in my classroom for my students to store rough drafts. The day before a sentence surgery (pre-op), I look through their rough drafts to find sick patients or paragraphs that need a great deal of help. From each class period, I write these paragraphs in my own handwriting **from each class period** and code them. Then I copy them onto an overhead transparency, and they are mixed up so that each class period gets a *Jane Doe* or *John Doe* from another class period. Rarely has a student ever correctly identified a patient’s author correctly. All paragraphs are now ready for their operations.

Before each new sentence surgery, I put on a lab coat and stethoscope. This preparation fills my students with anticipation. I review the Zeffocratic Oath and have them place a Writers Express and dictionary on their desk. I review highlights from any previous surgeries that day from other class periods.

In a darkened room, I wheel out their patient on a cart supporting an overhead projector (surgical lamp). I read the patient/paragraph to them and ask the students for their diagnosis on the patient’s condition. Then we proceed by looking at the topic sentence to see if it is clear and supported by the body of the paragraph. If the topic sentence is damaged or missing we fix or replace that limb. After that, we check each sentence to be sure that it is clear and that each of the **sentence beginning** is varied. If we notice that a detail doesn’t belong, we remove the tumor as if it were a foreign object. Whenever appropriate, I explain that certain changes are for merely cosmetic purposes (A nose is a nose no matter how you shape it and beauty is in the eyes of the beholder). When we come to a closing sentence that is unclear or missing, we fix it or replace it with an artificial limb. We read the paragraph again to be sure that all details are in the right order. I express to them that a heart and lung placed in the wrong order will cause a great deal of damage to the patient. During the surgery we suggest more specific details to replace anemic ones. To avoid malpractice, we also constantly check with out Writers Express and dictionary to be certain that we are using the correct procedure. Now only at the end of the sentence surgery do I allow my interns to make small repairs by correcting spelling and grammar mistakes (closing sutures).

After the operation, we sum up the major corrections that we did and relate them to various medical conditions and procedures. I recall on patient that was severely burned because pieces of each sentence in the paragraph were completely missing (singed), and we had to graph new pieces of details to each

sentence. One patient was extremely anemic, and once we added more specific details the patient was raring to go. We had successfully removed many tumors or foreign objects that had no place in our paragraphs. Some patients survive their surgery, but they lack many details that would never permit them to fully recover and leave the hospital. One patient did die from an extreme lack of details. A paragraph can't express itself, communicate, or function in the written language without details.

Doctors take the Hippocratic Oath to remind them of the basic rules of their profession. I have my students take the *Zeffocratic Oath* before their very first sentence surgery. This oath explains the very basis for their surgery on sentences within a paragraph. Before my students take this oath, I explain the importance of taking an oath and familiarize them with the needed vocabulary

### ZEEFOCRATIC OATH

*I solemnly swear to take care of all paragraphs in need  
I will do no harm to paragraphs that need my help.  
I will always refer to my Writers Express and dictionary.  
I will give periods to sentences that are having trouble breathing.  
I will also give clearer sentences to their mixed up thoughts  
I understand the importance of revising before editing.  
For the rest of my natural life, I promise to keep practicing these things.*

\*The Writers Express is a textbook purchased by the county to aid fourth and fifth graders in writing.

Every surgery I perform sparks the minds of students in ways that would help them and others with their writing. The humor allows us to revise and edit in a non-threatening manner. It inspires my students to be more professional and more specific on ways to help other students during peer editing. My students love operating on paragraphs, and by the end of the year it gets harder and harder to find sick patients, because more and more of them are written well.