

Grammar Instructional Routine: Language Pattern Detectives

Common Core State Standards:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.1 and CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3 and CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.3: Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening.

Overview

Language Pattern Detectives (LPD) is a 10-15 minute daily instructional routine that transforms students into language investigators who analyze, document, and solve grammar “cases.” Through careful examination of mentor sentences, guided practice, pattern analysis, and hands-on investigations, students develop both their detective skills (analytical thinking) and metacognitive awareness of grammar patterns, which empowers them to effectively use language in their own writing and speaking.

Symbol Key



Explicit Instruction







Opportunities to Respond



Feedback

Sample Lesson “Case File” 1

Case #512: The Formal/Informal Language Investigation					
Common Core State Standard: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3 & 5.3 – Use knowledge of language and its conventions when writing, speaking, reading, or listening					
Focus: Formal/Informal English* <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3.C: Differentiate between contexts that call for formal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where informal discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion). • CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.3.B: Compare and contrast the varieties of English (e.g., dialects, registers) used in stories, dramas, or poems. (*you can replace throughout lesson with “Varieties of English” if that is your focus)					
Target Pattern: Verb tenses					
Materials					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence (mentor sentences displayed on board or chart paper) • Detective Notebooks (individual journals/pencils or whiteboards/markers) • Evidence Board (place to display current investigations) • Pattern Database (compiled reference of solved cases) • <i>Optional:</i> Large chart paper to create anchor charts/T-charts • <i>Optional:</i> <i>Flossie & the Fox</i> by Patricia McKissack 					
Evidence Collection					
Evidence Source: <i>Flossie & the Fox</i> by Patricia McKissack (informal); formal sentence is teacher-created Evidence Samples: (mentor sentences) <i>Exhibit A:</i> “A fox is just a fox. That is not so scary.” (formal; teacher-created) <i>Exhibit B:</i> “Oh well, a fox be just a fox. That aine so scary.” ¹ (informal)					
Case Background (Teacher Preparation)					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select target grammatical structure & mentor sentence(s) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Target structure: Verb tenses ○ Mentor sentence: “Oh well, a fox be just a fox. That aine so scary.” (from Patricia McKissack’s book, <i>Flossie & the Fox</i>) •  Does the mentor sentence(s): <table border="1" data-bbox="297 1600 1373 1768"> <tr> <td data-bbox="297 1600 358 1768">✓</td><td data-bbox="358 1600 907 1768">  Clearly demonstrate the target grammatical structure? </td><td data-bbox="907 1600 1373 1768"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows contrast between formal English “is” and informal “be” • Shows contrast between negative constructions (“not” vs. “aine”) </td></tr> </table> 			✓	 Clearly demonstrate the target grammatical structure?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows contrast between formal English “is” and informal “be” • Shows contrast between negative constructions (“not” vs. “aine”)
✓	 Clearly demonstrate the target grammatical structure?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows contrast between formal English “is” and informal “be” • Shows contrast between negative constructions (“not” vs. “aine”) 			

¹ From McKissack (1986)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both sentences contain similar structures, making comparison clear
✓	💡 Come from authentic, grade-appropriate text?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From <i>Flossie & the Fox</i> by Patricia McKissack Grade-level appropriate picture book (typically grades K-4) Natural, authentic dialogue Rich cultural context
✓	💡 Connect meaningfully to current learning?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal/informal English (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4.3.C) Language varieties (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.3.B)
✓	💡 Contain language that students can realistically incorporate into their own writing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Simple sentence structures that can be adapted Patterns appear frequently in both speech and writing Natural dialogue students can model in their own creative writing Structures that transfer to many other contexts
✓	💡 Provide the right level of complexity for analysis?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short, clear sentences with similar structure Familiar vocabulary and context Short enough to analyze thoroughly but rich enough for meaningful discussion

Investigation Procedure


Step 1: Briefing (2-3 minutes)

Connect to Previous Learning (if applicable):


- Review previous investigation of language patterns
- Reference recent discussions about how language varies by situation
- Connect to ongoing investigation of verb patterns

Investigation Preview

- 💡 Set the scene/Connect to students' lives:
 - “Imagine you are investigating a case and you are trying to blend in to the crowd. Would you wear a tuxedo to a basketball game? Or sweatpants and a sweatshirt to a wedding?”
 - “Just like we choose different clothes for different situations, we choose different ways of speaking and writing for different situations.”
- 💡 Share today's focus:

- “We’re investigating how authors use formal and informal English (different language varieties) to show character and situation.”
-  Explain real-world importance:
 - “Understanding the difference between formal and informal English (different language varieties) helps us communicate effectively in different situations.”
- Frame the investigation
 - Case Background
 - Lead Detectives have discovered two ways of expressing the same idea. Our mission is to investigate how these patterns work and when each is most likely to be used.

Activate Prior Knowledge

-  Activating Questions:
 - “Do you ever change how you speak depending on who you're talking to?”
 - “In what situations?” or “To which groups of people?”
 - “What patterns have we already discovered about formal and informal language?” (if applicable)




Review Key Terms

- Formal/informal English and/or
 - Language variety (e.g., dialects, registers)
 - Code-switching/code-meshing
- Context


Step 2: Lead Detective Demonstration (7-8 minutes)

Initial Instruction

Evidence Presentation


-  Present mentor sentences:
 - **Exhibit A:** “A fox is just a fox. That is not so scary.” (formal)
 - **Exhibit B:** “Oh well, a fox be just a fox. That aine so scary.” (informal)

Lead Detective Think-Aloud

-  Model pattern analysis process:
 - “First, I notice these sentences mean the same thing...”
 - “I see different verb patterns here...”

- “This reminds me of how we change our language in different situations...”

Guided Pattern Discovery

-  Walk through initial pattern identification:
 - Circle verbs in both samples
 - Note differences in negative words (“is not” & “aine” = “ain’t”)
 - Point out parallel structures (‘to be’ verb; negation)



Engagement Check

- Ask questions to check for comprehension & engage students:
 - “What patterns are we seeing?”
 - “Is there anything you are unfamiliar with or don’t understand?”
 - “Why might the author use different varieties?”
 - “Where else might we see patterns like this?”

Step 3: Partner/Group Investigation (10-12 minutes)


Teacher-Guided Practice



Detective Partnerships

- Pair students (or create small groups) for collaborative investigation
- Review partnership expectations



Guided Analysis

-  Partners/groups work together to:
 1. Complete pattern analysis chart:
(can be made into worksheets or copied onto papers or into notebooks)


Formal Language	Informal Language

2. You can have students:
 - a. Fill in the patterns from the mentor sentences under each column,
 - b. Create their own examples for each column, or
 - c. Identify contexts for each variety (e.g., “school assessments” would use formal language, “text messages” would use informal language)

Teacher Support

- Circulate among partners/small groups to:
 - Monitor discussions
 -  Offer feedback
 -  Provide scaffolded prompts
 - Support struggling teams

Team Discussions

-  Have detective pairs:
 - Explain patterns to each other
 - Compare findings with nearby teams
 - Share discoveries with class

Step 4: Solo Investigation (5-7 minutes)

Independent Practice



Choose an activity/activities for students to practice:

Individual Case Work

- Students can independently:
 - Create new samples
 - Apply patterns to their own writing

Find More Evidence





- Look through poems, stories, etc. to find new examples of informal patterns (see Resources for mentor texts)
- Extension:
 - Create new pairs following the same patterns:
 - If students found: “How do a fox look?” (from *Flossie & the Fox*)
 - Have them create a formal equivalent: “How does a fox look?” or “What does a fox look like?”

Pattern Translation Practice

- Translate sentences between varieties:
 - “I don’t believe you a fox.” ↔ “I don’t believe you are a fox.”

- “I haven’t seen a fox before.” ↔ “I aine seen a fox before.” or “I aine never seen a fox before.”


While students are working (either independently or in small groups), make sure you are circulating or meeting with them to:

-  Ensure understanding (provide additional examples as needed),
-  Answer questions,
-  Provide feedback (including celebrating successful pattern use!),
-  Scaffold learning,
- Address common misconceptions, etc.

Step 5: Case Resolution (3-5 minutes)

Maintenance

Pattern Database Entry

-  In Detective Notebooks, have students:
 - Create a new entry titled: “Verb Patterns”
 - Formal:
 - Uses “is,” “are,” “am” for present tense
 - Informal:
 - Can use “be” for present tense
 - Add examples from investigation

Document Findings

- Post Key Findings on Evidence Board
 - “Both language varieties are valid and rule-governed”
 - “Some situations call for different varieties”
 - “Skilled language users can switch between varieties, if necessary”

Notes

Encourage classroom discussions about how language is used in other settings. Through Language Pattern Detectives, students learn to recognize that skilled writers often intentionally vary from “standard” patterns to achieve specific effects. Use this as a springboard to kickstart discussions about how authors play with language, using innovative structures and creative variations to craft meaning and voice. This approach helps students understand grammar as a toolkit for expression

rather than a rigid set of rules, while developing their ability to make informed choices about language use in their own writing.

- Celebrate students' ability to use multiple language varieties – this is a strength!
- Foster linguistic confidence – all language varieties are valid and rule-governed! (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2016)
- Emphasize pattern recognition over being “correct”
- Focus on building metacognitive awareness
- Connect to authentic writing purposes
(See Resources for more)

Adaptations

Support

Plan for Support

- Schedule follow-up with students who are struggling
- Plan ongoing review opportunities

Supportive Structures

- Provide sentence frames for discussion and practice
- Use visual supports to show relationships
- Allow think time before discussion
- Accept various forms of participation (verbal, written, gestural)
- Build on students' home language knowledge when possible

Extension Activities

For Advanced Detectives

- Investigate other verb patterns in *Flossie & the Fox*
- Collect evidence of language varieties in other texts
- Document language varieties used in different situations

Materials

Detective Notebook Entry Template

Evidence Samples:

A: _____

B: _____

Pattern Clues:**1. Patterns:**

a) _____

b) _____

2. Where I might use each:

a) _____

b) _____

3. My own examples:

a) _____

b) _____

Resources

Question Stems

- “What do you notice about...?”
- “Why might the author have chosen...?”
- “What would happen if we changed...?”
- “Where could you use this in your writing?”
- “How does this help the reader understand...?”

Activity Ideas

- Grammar sort
 - [TPT Link](#)
 - [YouTube video](#)
- Find the pattern
 - [¡Colorín Colorado!: Sentence Pattern Chart](#)
 - [National Urban Alliance: Sentence Frames](#)
- Sentence combining
 - [Reading Rockets: Sentence Combining](#)
 - [Intensive Intervention Guide in Sentence Combining](#)
- Sentence deconstruction
 - [¡Colorín Colorado!: Sentence Deconstruction](#)
 - [Cox Campus: Sentence Deconstruction Routine](#)
- Sentence reconstruction (deconstruction in reverse)
- Mentor text hunt
 - [Mentor Sentences: Grammar, Word Choice & More](#)
 - [Literacy Loving Gals: Using Mentor Texts to Teach Sentence Variety](#)