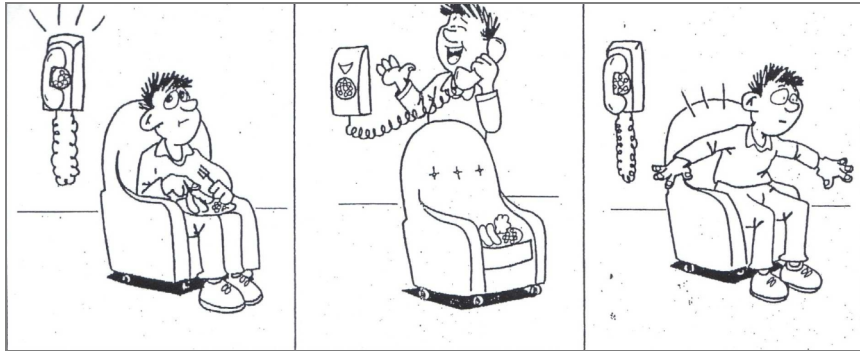


# STEP-BY-STEP WITH FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR

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Tim is a 12-year-old ESL student. Here are three texts which follow his writing development. The texts are in response to the following visual and the text underneath it.



Mr Bates was eating his dinner when the phone rang. He put his dinner on the chair and talked on the phone. When he finished, he sat on his dinner.

Text 1: September  
(no support was provided)

*Mr bates was eating the food and then hear the phone is ringing. Then he put his food on the chair and get the phone, talk to his friend. Finally, when his finish he went back, but when he sit on the chair, he forgot the food, but it's too late so he can't eat his food now.*

Text 2: November, 7 weeks later  
(no teacher support was provided in writing this but the use of a thesaurus was encouraged)

*Mr Bates who is a forgetful man was eating his delicious dinner on a comfortable chair, then the telephone is ringing very noisily. Then he quickly get up and put his lovely dinner on the chair and meander there and converse to his friend, and then his friend admitted "Lets go play basketball tomorrow. Mr Bates was very joyful, and yelled to his friend "Okay, thats cool", and put the telephone back, but when he went back, set on the chair, he forgot the food was on the chair, but it was too late, so now he can't eat his delicious dinner.*

Text 3: November, 8 weeks later  
(support was provided; including word banks and scaffolding through joint construction)

*Like a clam at high tide, Mr Bates was eating his extremely delicious dinner while sitting on his comfortable chair. Suddenly the incredibly noisy phone rang so he quickly put his delicious food on the chair and rushed to answer it. He chatted with his best friend who suggested, "Let's go camping tomorrow." Mr Bates was overjoyed and screamed, "That's so cool! Okay, I'll see you tomorrow," and hung up. He then went back to sit on his chair, but because he had a mind like a sieve, he forgot his food was there! It was too late, and then he yelled, "Now I can't eat my lovely dinner!"*

How did the student develop the linguistic tools needed to be able to write a text that is so much more advanced after only eight weeks?

This article outlines the kinds of activities the class teacher undertook with the above student and with all her students. It is written as if she were recounting the steps taken, and the worksheets and language examples used.

Support was provided by the teacher by developing with the students a range of linguistic resources from a functional perspective. The focus was on elements related to developing the field such as processes, participants and circumstances and then more specifically nominal groups.

## Working with the students

As an introduction to functional grammar, I tell the students that we are going to look at a fun way of turning ‘boring’ writing into ‘super’ writing and we are going to use three colours (green, red and blue) to help us. Across the top of my whiteboard I have a permanent display of the functional questions that are concerned with transitivity: processes, participants and circumstances.

The diagram illustrates functional grammar concepts through three examples:

- Red bubbles (Participant):**
  - What ... ? (eg is barking, burned, is going to fall)
  - Who ... ? (eg is running, yelled, is going to cook)
- Green bubbles (Process):**
  - What are we doing here? (eg running, cooking, falling)
  - What is going on here? (eg barking, burning, yelling)
- Blue bubbles (Circumstance):**
  - How ... ? ('are we doing it?': gracefully, slowly, softly)
  - When ... ? ('are we doing it?': tomorrow, in the morning, on Monday)
  - Why ... ? ('are we doing it?': for health reasons, for money)
  - Where ... ? ('are we doing it?': at the beach, on the oval, in the playground)
  - Who with ... ? ('are we doing it with?': with my family, instead of me, with Kona)

Illustrations: A ballerina, a swimmer (Fred), and a surfer (Tom).

Examples of functional grammar analysis:

- Jane is dancing gracefully**
  - Who? (participant)
  - What's happening? (process)
  - How? (circumstance)
- Fred swims every day**
  - Who? (participant)
  - What's happening? (process)
  - When? (circumstance)
- Tom is surfing at Burleigh Heads**
  - Who? (participant)
  - What's happening? (process)
  - Where? (circumstance)

A typical discussion surrounding this display might be:

Teacher: What can you tell me about the green words?

Student: They tell us what the actions are. (They might also use expressions such as the doing words or the action words or the verbs.)

Teacher: That's right, these words tell us what is happening or what is going on in the sentence (I am drawing their attention to the display charts above the board.)

Teacher: What can you tell me about the red words?

Student: They are the people (or the things – some might even say that they are nouns).

Teacher: Yes, these words tell us 'who' or 'what' is dancing (or whatever the action is.)

Teacher: What can you tell me about the blue words?

Students: (By now, they are using the charts to help them answer.) They tell us where Dan surfs. (Other possible examples are when Dan swims or how Grace dances or why Dan runs.)

Next, I present the students with a series of sentences and a green, red and blue pencil. Some sample sentences are:

*My mum is eating apples.*

*My dog sleeps on a blanket.*

*Jane is singing a lovely song.*

*Yesterday, I went to the beach.*

*At my Nan's house, I have a fishing rod.*

We work through the sentences one by one in the following way:

Teacher: In sentence 1, what's going on? What's my mum doing?

Student: She's eating

Teacher: Yes, so what colour do we underline it?

Student: Green.

Teacher: Why is it green?

Student: Because she's eating; that is what she's doing.

Teacher: Who is eating?

Student: My mum.

Teacher: Yes, so what colour do we underline that?

Student: Red.

Teacher: Yes, why?

Student: Because my mum tells us who is eating the apples.

Teacher: So my mum is eating what?

Student: Apples.

Teacher: And what colour do we underline apples?

Student: Red, because apples tells us what mum is eating.

I usually work through about 20 of these sentences in the 'Writing in Colours' worksheet and, by this point, the students are ready to start creating some of their own.

## WORKSHEET

### Writing in colours

My mum is eating apples.

My friend plays tennis

Tom surfs at Surfer's Paradise.

I live with Jane.

Jane is singing a lovely song.

The baby is crying loudly.

The baby is sucking his toy.

My sister drives a sports car.

I want a red dress.

Sometimes I go to Brisbane.

At my Nan's house, I have a fishing rod.  
 I eat slowly.  
 Mum drives to work.  
 Dan runs for health reasons.  
 Jan swims every day.  
 Yesterday, I went to the beach.  
 My dog sleeps on a blanket.  
 Dad paints on weekends.  
 She picked a flower.  
 The boy climbed a tree.  
 Slowly the cat walked into the house.  
 I read a book last week.  
 The teacher called the boy.

With the 'Writing in Colours' sheet to refer to if needed, students write their own sentence examples to set patterns as set out in the worksheet. To start this writing activity off, I create a word bank of processes, participants and circumstances.

## WORKSHEET

### Writing in colours...now it's your turn

red, green red

red, green, blue

blue, red, green, red

blue, red, green, blue

## Expanding sentences

Following the ‘Writing in colours: now it’s your turn’ activity, students are generally ready to start expanding a sentence on their own. While the focus is initially on describers, adding qualifiers (initially expressed as adding a ‘group of words’) is also incorporated into the same lesson. So, by the end of this lesson, students have expanded the nominal group by placing describers in front of the thing and a qualifier after it.

Students are presented with a sentence such as: *The cat is chasing the dog.*

Teacher: What’s going on here? What is happening?

Student: Chasing.

Teacher: (Underlines chasing in green.) *The cat is chasing the dog.*

Teacher: Who is chasing?

Student: The cat.

Teacher: (Underlines the cat in red.) *The cat is chasing the dog.*

Teacher: The cat is chasing what?

Student: The dog.

Teacher: (Underlines the dog in red so that the end result is: *The cat is chasing the dog.*) Is this an interesting sentence?

A discussion follows about what makes writing interesting with the gist of this discussion being that what makes writing interesting is a reader being able to picture what the cat and dog look like through good descriptions.

## Exploring describers

A word bank of describers is then created; first for the cat and then for the dog.

Teacher: Let’s make this cat bad. Give me some describing words for this cat (mean, evil, ugly, big, enormous, hungry, naughty).

Let’s make the dog good. Give me some describing words for this dog (cute, fluffy, happy, sweet, shy, little).

We then put a sentence together using these words: *The enormous, ugly cat chased the cute, fluffy dog.*

## Exploring qualifiers

The qualifiers (which, in the beginning, we call ‘group of words’) I start with for building the field of cats are prepositional phrases beginning with with (with evil eyes, with sharp claws, with dirty fur, with long whiskers).

Teacher: To make this sentence even more interesting let’s think of a group of words to further describe the cat.

Then we do the same for dogs.

Teacher: Let’s think of a group of words to further describe the dog (with fluffy, white fur; with enormous, brown eyes; with a diamond collar).

In the lessons that follow, I introduce alternative prepositions (at, in, near, next to.) After prepositional phrases as qualifiers have been worked with, we move on to clauses as qualifiers.

Next, we put a sentence together using the expanded describers and qualifiers, such as:

*The enormous, ugly cat with evil eyes chased the cute, fluffy dog with a diamond collar.*

## More qualifiers

When students are ready, the examples of ‘groups of words’ can be expanded to include options besides ‘with...’. To do this, I start with a list of prepositions and lead the students into compiling other prepositional phrases.

Teacher: We don’t have to start our ‘groups of words’ with with. We could start with any of these prepositions (showing the preposition chart).

Let’s think of a group of words starting with at, (at the beach, at my nanna’s house, at school), in (in the garden, in the box), under (under the house), near (near my house), down (down the street).

At some point, depending on the level of English of the group, I explain that these groups of words are called ‘prepositional phrases’.

## Using circumstances

To conclude, I ask the students how we can add circumstances to sentences; often, we refer to their visual representation, such as: “Can we add some blue to this?” Students continually refer to the display above the whiteboard, which shows the functional groupings with their colours and their questions.

Teacher: What could we say for when? (Last night, the other day, this morning, on the weekend.) Where could we write that?

Generally, the students want to add the circumstances at the end, so the purpose of this is to open them up to the idea that the ‘blue’ group of words can also come at the front.

The class continues through the same questioning sequence for circumstances:

where: under our house, across the street, along the beach, around the pool

how: quickly, angrily, silently (In the early stages, circumstances of manner can be difficult to elicit so, initially, I focus on when and where).

A few options are written up to conclude our joint construction:

*The enormous, ugly cat with evil eyes chased the cute, fluffy dog with a diamond collar under our house.*

*On the weekend, the enormous, ugly cat with evil eyes chased the cute, fluffy dog with a diamond collar.*

*Last week, the enormous, ugly cat with evil eyes chased the cute, fluffy dog with a diamond collar around our pool.*

## Relative clauses as qualifiers

The next step is to return to the nominal group and explore relative clauses as qualifiers.

Teacher: ‘Groups of words’ can also start with who, which, and that (whom and whose come in later). We then brainstorm clauses starting with each of these: who (who lives next door), which (which has a long tail, which was playing on the beach), that (that has a diamond collar, that was barking all night).

*The feral cat with sharp teeth and claws chased the fluffy white puppy that was wearing a diamond collar into the huge house with magnificent gardens // and knocked over all of the golden statues.*

## ESL students

I have found that while ESL students are able to create phrases and clauses quite easily (provided they have developed the lexis), when they put it all together, they are inclined to write examples such as: *The cat with pointy ears he chased the dog.* Although it is possible to say this in English, it is highly marked and it is almost certain that students are choosing it because they are transferring from their primary language, in which it is likely to be an unmarked choice. In order to correct this, I get them to create sentences on a grid so they can clearly see that straight after the group of words comes the green.

## WORKSHEET

Pointer	Describer	Thing	Qualifier 'group of words'	What's happening?	... end of the sentence: what, who
<i>participant</i>				<i>process</i>	<i>participant</i>
<i>The</i>	<i>pretty</i>	<i>girl</i>	<i>with long hair</i>	<i>is holding</i>	<i>her grandma's hand.</i>

Pointer	Describer	Thing	Qualifier 'group of words'	What's happening?	... end of the sentence: where, when, how, who with
<i>participant</i>				<i>process</i>	<i>circumstance</i>
<i>A</i>	<i>cute</i>	<i>cat</i>	<i>with blue eyes</i>	<i>was sitting</i>	<i>in the window.</i>

This grid concept can then be extended to expose the students to the range of functional groups in the nominal group and to a range of examples.

Note that the other participants are more than likely to be nominal groups and the circumstances themselves can contain nominal groups so whatever can be described and classified and quantified and qualified in the nominal group first

## WORKSHEET

Pointer	Counter (How many?)	Intensifier	Describer (What's it like?)	Classifier (What type?)	Thing	Qualifier (Which one in particular?)	What's happening?	... end of the sentence: what, who
<i>participant</i>							<i>process</i>	<i>participant</i>
<i>The</i>		<i>incredibly</i>	<i>black</i>	<i>guide</i>	<i>dog</i>	<i>near the ferris wheel</i>	<i>was eating</i>	<i>fairy floss.</i>

Pointer	Counter (How many?)	Intensifier	Describer (What's it like?)	Classifier (What type?)	Thing	Qualifier (Which one in particular?)	What's happening?	... end of the sentence: where, when, how, with who, with what
<i>participant</i>							<i>process</i>	<i>circumstance</i>
	<i>Several</i>	<i>rather</i>	<i>naughty</i>		<i>boys</i>	<i>in front of the clown stand</i>	<i>pointed</i>	<i>at the angry man.</i>

### How things are done: circumstances of manner

Once students have some control of expanding the nominal groups, both as the participants and in the prepositional phrases that function as circumstances, I switch the focus to circumstances of manner – initially those realised by adverbs ending in ‘ly’.

Using a selection of simple action pictures, I ask the students to describe how the person is performing the action.

Teacher: How is the bear eating the berries?

Students: Quickly, hungrily, messily, silently.

Teacher: How are the children playing?

Students: Happily, loudly, energetically, quietly, excitedly.

Teacher: How did the turtle cross the road?

Students: Slowly, carefully, anxiously, nervously.

After going through sufficient pictures to create a word bank of these circumstances of manner, I then demonstrate how they can move around in sentences because we often need them to be close to the action.

Teacher: Give me a sentence about the children using ‘happily’.

Student: *The children played a game happily.*

Teacher: (Writes this on the board and continues asking the functional questions and underlining or highlighting and ends up with *The children played a game happily.*)  
What’s going on? (played) Who played? (the children) Played what? (a game).

Teacher: What colour is happily?

Student: Blue.

Teacher: Why?

Student: Because this is how the children played.

Teacher: (Teacher underlines happily in blue: *The children played a game happily.*) Can we place ‘happily’ anywhere else in the sentence? (The class discusses the options and writes each one on the board:

*The children happily played a game.*

*The children played a game happily.*



The lady drove home.  
 The lady drove home slowly.  
 Slowly the lady drove home.  
 The lady slowly drove home.  
 The lady drove slowly home.

An extension of this is to introduce similes (circumstances of manner (comparison)) and idioms as an alternative to using a describer or circumstance of manner (means) in a sentence, for example:

Happy/happily: as happy as a lark, on cloud nine, like a clam at high tide, in seventh heaven  
 Angry/angrily: about to blow a fuse, hot under the collar, like a wild animal, as mad as a hornet  
 Sad/sadly: feeling blue, wearing a long face, like a piano without its key

Students are given opportunities to play with these, starting off with individual sentences and then moving to short descriptive texts which I call 'mood writing'. For example:

Tom walked home happily.  
 Tom walked home as happy as a lark.  
 As happy as a lark, Tom walked home.

## 'Mood' writing

Once students are underway expanding nominal groups and are comfortable using circumstance of manner (means) in various sentence positions, I then introduce 'mood' writing. I give students 3 or 4 simple sentences such as:

*Ben walked home.*  
*He put his bag down.*  
*He went to his room.*  
*He sat on his bed.*

Teacher: Is this interesting writing?

Student: No, it's boring.

A discussion follows as to why this writing is boring and what needs to be added to make it more interesting. Based on the students' experiences to date, their responses typically state that it needs some describers or qualifiers ('groups of words') or circumstances of manner (means).

I then ask the students if they can tell what mood Ben is in. Is he happy, sad, excited, angry, or nervous? They conclude that this can't be answered from the sentences they have. So, I ask the students how they could let the reader know that Ben is angry without using the words angry or angrily? A discussion follows as to the actions that alerts one to the fact that someone is angry. Suggestions such as the following are recorded on the board.

Angry: he walked home stomping his feet, he was red-faced, he had a frown on his face, he was yelling, stamping his feet, banging things.

I then go back to the four sentences shown earlier and one by one go through the familiar questioning sequence:

Teacher: What's going on in this sentence: Ben walked home?  
 Student: Walked.  
 Teacher: What colour do I underline it with?  
 Student: Green. (Teacher underlines walk in green.)  
 Teacher: Who walked?  
 Student: Ben.

The teacher follows the same questioning sequence through to the final sentence until the text looks like:

**Ben** walked home.  
**He** put his bag down.  
**He** went to his room.  
**He** sat on his bed.

Teacher: Let's look at the first sentence. Instead of walked, how else could he have come home? Remember all the words we thought of that tell us how people do things – all the -ly words, the circumstances of manner.

At this stage, students have access to a simple student thesaurus and are encouraged to use it. Responses are recorded on paper so that I can keep responses for future reference.

**walked:** ran, bolted, dashed, sprinted, zoomed, flew, plodded, stomped, strode, trudged  
**how:** quickly, slowly, breathlessly, madly, silently, glumly, sulkily

By this stage, I have put together several pages of these words, some with explanations as to what they mean, as a reference tool to be used by the students during these writing sessions.

Teacher: Looking back at your circumstances of manner (-ly) list, how else can we say 'quickly'? Remember the lessons we did on idioms and similes.

These responses are also recorded on the **how** page.

**quickly:** as fast as a lightning bolt, like a speeding bullet, as fast as a race horse, lightning-swift  
**slowly:** as slow as a snail, snail-like

Teacher: How can we tell the reader how Ben feels? Which idioms and similes can we use to get his mood across to the reader.

**angrily:** like a wild animal, going off the deep end, about to explode, as mad as a hornet

We continue to create word banks for *put*, *went*, and *sat* in the same way—the process first and then the manner in which it could be done afterwards.

**put:** threw, hurled, flung, tossed  
**how:** rudely, loudly, savagely, furiously, viciously, also refer to angrily  
**went:** refer to walked then add any more...stormed, fled, retreated, tore, scurried

**how:** refer to how for walk + idioms/similes for quickly, angrily then add any more...heavily, boldly, bossily, bravely, grumpily

**sat:** use put alternatives: threw, hurled, flung, tossed

**how:** refer to other how lists. At this stage there is usually nothing new to add

Next, we look at the things we can elaborate on to further enhance the mood, such as: Ben (referring to the 'angry' list), his home, his bag, where he put his bag, his room, his bed.

For the joint construction, my students wanted him to: throw his bag on the couch, his room to be messy, and his bed to be unmade. And to make sure the reason for Ben being angry and behaving the way he did was clear, I asked the students why he was so angry. As it was near report card time for my students, their response was, predictably, about a bad report card.

This was the piece jointly constructed with the end-of-Year 2 ESL students using the various word banks.

Ben ran home like a speeding bullet and flung his bag on the couch. He stomped heavily up the wooden stairs to his messy room and slammed the door. He threw himself onto his unmade bed and hurled his report card out the window. After that he screamed, "I hate school!"

## Students going overboard

Once students start exploring and playing in their writing with all of these linguistic resources, they usually go completely overboard and add describers and qualifiers to every 'thing'. This is when we discuss that too much can also ruin the effect you want in your writing, so during a joint construction, after all the 'things' have been identified, we might decide which ones will get describers only, which ones get qualifiers only or both describers and qualifiers, and which ones get neither.

## Moving circumstances to the front

Once students have become quite comfortable expanding these texts using the jointly constructed word banks, I encourage them to start some of their sentences 'blue' rather than 'red'. For this example:

Ben ran home like a speeding bullet and flung his bag on the couch.

I would circle the circumstance of manner (comparison), 'like a speeding bullet', and draw an arrow to in front of Ben so that it became:

Like a speeding bullet, Ben ran home and flung his bag on the couch.

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What is evident as we look at this teacher's work with her students is the focus on the functional questions. It is also clear that in this way she can be explicit about which language resources are available to make the required meanings. And, lastly, it is in her methodical approach that the students are scaffolded into not only a development of their language but their learning.