The long and the short and the tall
Looking at sentence types

What exactly is a sentence? That's a trickier question than it looks. Consider these definitions. Which ones do you recognise? Which ones do you think hold true?

- A sentence is a complete unit of thought.
- A sentence is something that begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop.
- A sentence is an independent unit which would still make complete sense if you took it out of context.
- A sentence is a fairly long stretch of language, bigger than a word or a clause.
- A sentence is a verb, combined with one or more of the following elements: a subject, an object, a complement or an adverbial.

Initial investigation

Read the following extract from *The Baghdad Blog* by Salam Pax. This is a blog that gained worldwide attention during the Gulf War in 2003 for its vivid, funny, no-spin account of events from the inside. Consider each sentence and explore the validity of the four definitions. What are the strengths and limitations of each one?

Tuesday, 21 January 2003

Bad, bad weather. Cloudy skies and having to turn the lights on the moment you wake up because the sun just forgot to rise or something. I am grumpy, having only Travis to listen to at the office is not helping my mood either. How these guys manage to make everything sound so depressing is amazing.

A quick run-thru how things are in Baghdad the last couple of days.

Electricity: two hours off every four hours. My cousin is calling this psychological training for harder times. He spends his two hours in total sensory deprivation, as in no radio, no light, no TV. Only candles and the sound of the rain.

Internet: For some reason the ISP does not have uninterrupted power supply for the servers or something, because they also go down with the black-outs. (...) And three more governorates are going to get Internet this week: Tamim, Anbar and Salah al-Deen. Happy porn-surfing to all.

The Jordanian Border: Best way to go to Jordan from Iraq (if you are an Iraqi that is):
Take a plane – don't use the much more affordable bus. You have a better chance of getting thru the border if they think you have money.

The Inspections: Nobody was paying much attention until they decided to go into those houses in the al-Ghazalia district. That got people talking.

Oh… and I have changed beers.

The Baghdad Blog copyright © Salam Pax

Some of the problems encountered with these definitions might include:

1. What counts as a complete unit of thought?
2. Is *anything* starting with a capital letter and ending with a full stop a sentence? What about when we transcribe speech with all its natural pauses, interruptions and disjointed bits? Is children's early writing, before punctuation has been fully learned, written in something other than sentences?
3. How many sentences can truly be taken out of context? What about pronoun reference and ellipsis?
4. The sentences in the extract range from three words to 25. How long is long?
5. What combinations are and aren't possible? Does anything go?

It is clear that there is more to sentences than meets the eye.

Looking more closely at the structure of sentences:

Fortunately, despite this complexity, it is possible to organise sentences into a classification which starts to make sense of it all. Just be aware that, as with many areas of language, the edges are not all that neat. The classification model overleaf is adapted from discussion in Crystal, *Encyclopaedia of the English Language* (p 216). This helps to clarify the validity of some of the definitions.

1. Yes, sentences do contain a complete unit of thought, but those thoughts vary – some are very simple expressions of emotion, such as a surprised "oh!", some are complex interactions between ideas that are best expressed in multiple sentences with complex patterns of clause linking.
2. Yes, generally speaking, particularly in published writing, and especially if we include additional punctuation devices such as question marks, exclamation marks, and even perhaps the three

trailing dots common in much contemporary communication. But we can't meaningfully apply this criterion to sentences in transcripts of speech.

3. This definition is still tricky because so much meaning is tied up in the sentence's context. But this definition is drawing on the idea that a sentence has an internal coherence, something that "Cheers!" has as much as "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a fortune must be in want of a wife".
4. A suspect definition if we accept the distinction between major and minor sentences. Even if you only consider major sentences, it still doesn't really work as "Jesus wept", at just two words, is still a grammatically complete sentence. Length can be helpful in analysing style, but not sentence type.
5. This definition only applies to major sentences. To ignore minor sentences, or to label them as "incomplete", is to ignore a large part of our perfectly regular, patterned, rule bound, language in use.

Adapted from *The Encyclopaedia of the English Language* copyright © David Crystal
The use of different sentence types

Read the two opening extracts below from children's fiction. Classify the sentence types used in each text, then consider the reasons for any differences you observe. There is an issue of the intended audience's age/reading ability, but what other effects are created by the patterns of variation in the sentence types? Consider this within each text, as well as comparing the overall patterns of difference between the texts.

1. From *Boris the Brainiest Baby* by Laurence Anholt

We are going to meet Boris. We are going to meet Boris, the brainiest baby ever born. I cannot tell you how brainy Boris is. He is just too brainy for words. The minute Boris was born, he shook hands with the doctor and kissed his mother. "Good morning," he said. "I am Boris, the brainiest baby ever born."

All the nurses in the hospital came running. They had never seen a new baby dress himself.

Boris put on a tiny suit.

Boris put on a tiny bow-tie.

Boris took a tiny umbrella and Boris stepped outside.

"Boris, you are too young to leave the hospital," said his mother and father and all the doctors. "You are only one hour old."

"Nonsense!" said Boris. "I am Boris, the brainiest baby ever born. I have many things to do. Please call a taxi."

Boris the Brainiest Baby copyright © Laurence Anholt

2. From *The Railway Children* by E. Nesbit

They were not railway children to begin with. I don't suppose they had ever thought about railways except as a means of getting to Maskelyne and Cook's, the Pantomime, Zoological Gardens, and Madame Tussaud's. They were just ordinary suburban children, and they lived with their Father and Mother in an ordinary red-brick-fronted villa, with coloured glass in the front door, a tiled passage that was called a hall, a bath-room with hot and cold water, electric bells, French windows, and a good deal of white paint, and 'every modern convenience', as the house-agents say.

There were three of them. Roberta was the eldest. Of course, Mothers never have favourites, but if their Mother HAD had a favourite, it might have been Roberta. Next came Peter, who wished to be an Engineer when he grew up; and the youngest was Phyllis, who meant extremely well.

Taking it further

Complete the following tasks:

1. Has there been a change in the frequency of use of the different sentence types during the development of Modern English (19th century to today)? Conduct a small scale investigation to explore this question further. You could use headline news stories from similar types of newspapers for different years. Have a look at http://www.uk.olivesoftware.com/ to access old newspapers but be careful to make sure you compare like with like, and think carefully about how many will make a sensible sample.

2. To what extent is it true that the younger the intended audience, the higher the frequency of simple sentences in children's fiction? Conduct a small scale investigation to explore this question further. Be careful to make sure you compare like with like, and think carefully about how many texts and how large a sample extract will make a sensible sample.