What Comes First

How sentence order shapes suspense, contrast, and pace

11-12.L.3 "Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening. Vary syntax for effect..."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline the one sentence in each paragraph that begins with a dependent clause. Circle the first word of its main clause to see what the writer makes you wait to learn.

The Box from the Basement

1. When the basement door finally opened, Mara saw a thin brown line above the lowest shelf. The river had entered the library overnight, and the archive room smelled of mud and wet paper. On the floor lay a box of letters from residents who had recorded the neighborhood's first years. Mara lifted its lid. The envelopes had softened, but the writing still showed through in places. Her colleague called from the doorway, asking whether they should carry the box upstairs. Mara did not answer at once; the brown line on the wall showed how high the water had reached.

2. Although the letters looked fragile, the staff moved them to a clean table before the room grew warmer. They did not peel apart pages that clung together. Instead, they placed damp bundles in labeled containers for specialists to assess. A freezer could slow mold growth while the staff planned how to dry the collection, but it would not restore a washed-away word. Mara wrote the box number, its location, and the time it was found. The list seemed dull beside the letters themselves. Yet a careful record would keep a future reader from mistaking a rescued fragment for the whole story.

3. Because the power had failed, Mara studied the labels by the daylight coming through a narrow window. One label bore a date; another had only a street name. She imagined the neighbors who had once waited for news from those addresses, then stopped herself. Imagination could fill a silence, but it could also invent a voice. Outside, a truck backed up to the loading dock. The driver asked where to take the boxes. “Upstairs,” Mara said. “Not to the dumpster.” The answer took seconds; deciding what those boxes might still tell the city would take years.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. In the first sentence, what does the opening clause make you wait to learn? How does that order affect the moment at the basement door?

2. How does beginning the second paragraph with “Although” shape your expectations about what the staff will do?

3. Rewrite the first sentence of the third paragraph with its main clause first. Then explain what receives emphasis in your version.

4. Compare “Not to the dumpster” with the final sentence. How does the change in sentence length affect the pace and meaning?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a three-sentence scene set somewhere other than a library. Begin one sentence with a dependent clause that delays an important action, and use one sentence of no more than four words to change the pace. Add a fourth sentence explaining the effect of both choices.

What Comes First

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline the one sentence in each paragraph that begins with a dependent clause. Circle the first word of its main clause to see what the writer makes you wait to learn. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	In the first sentence, what does the opening clause make you wait to learn? How does that order affect the moment at the basement door?	**It delays what Mara sees. The wait builds anticipation before the brown waterline is revealed.**
2	How does beginning the second paragraph with “Although” shape your expectations about what the staff will do?	**The letters' fragile condition suggests the staff might leave them alone. The main clause counters that expectation: the staff moves them to a clean table.**
3	Rewrite the first sentence of the third paragraph with its main clause first. Then explain what receives emphasis in your version.	**Mara studied the labels by the daylight coming through a narrow window because the power had failed. This version puts Mara's action before the reason she needs daylight.**
4	Compare “Not to the dumpster” with the final sentence. How does the change in sentence length affect the pace and meaning?	**The brief command makes Mara's decision feel immediate. The longer final sentence slows the pace and shifts attention to the years it may take to understand the letters.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

As the doors began to close, I spotted my notebook on the empty platform. The train lurched. I pressed my palm against the glass and watched the blue cover recede as the train gathered speed. The delayed discovery creates suspense, while the brief sentence makes the missed chance feel abrupt.

Accept explanations that connect clause order or sentence length to a specific effect supported by the passage. In the independent scene, the dependent clause must come before its main clause, and the short sentence must contain no more than four words.