

# Teaching Dictation for the USCIS Citizenship Test

For the writing portion of the citizenship test, students must write one sentence that is read aloud (dictated) by the adjudicator. To complete this task successfully, students need help in learning to hear and write both the *content* words and the *function* words in sentences.

## Content Words

*Content* words convey the main meaning of the sentence and include people, places, actions, and dates. Parts of speech are usually nouns, adjectives, and main verbs. Content words are usually stressed when read aloud in a sentence.

## Function Words

*Function* words do not convey the main meaning of the sentence but connect the content words. Parts of speech are usually articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, and pronouns. Students often have trouble hearing and writing function words when they are dictated in a sentence because they are not usually stressed when read aloud in a sentence.

*Look at Example 1 below, and then try to do 2 -3 on your own. The answer is on the last page.*

**Example 1:** The President lives in the White House.

Content Words: President, lives, White House

Functions Words: the, in

**Example 2:** Citizens have the right to vote.

Content Words: \_\_\_\_\_

Functions Words: \_\_\_\_\_

**Example 3:** We vote for the President in November.

Content Words: \_\_\_\_\_

Functions Words: \_\_\_\_\_

Why is it important that teacher distinguish between content and function words? It's important teachers know that content words are easier for students to hear in sentences. Function words, however, are often harder to hear. Students will need ample practice learning to hear and write both content words and function words in dictated sentences. The following pages contain several strategies for helping students do that. Note: The sentences that teachers use for dictation practice should contain words from the USCIS document titled "Writing Vocabulary for the New Naturalization Test." This document is at: [www.uscis.gov/files/nativedocuments/writing\\_vocab.pdf](http://www.uscis.gov/files/nativedocuments/writing_vocab.pdf)

## Technique #1: How Many Missing Words?

*This technique helps students learn to hear and write the function words in a dictated sentence.*

**Step One:** The teacher writes a dehydrated sentence (a sentence containing only content words) on the board and asks students to copy them on a sheet of paper.

*For example:*

President lives White House

**Step Two:** The teacher then reads the complete sentence aloud and asks the students to write a caret on their papers in every place they hear a missing word. The teacher should read the sentence aloud three times. The students write on their papers:

^ President lives ^ ^ White House

**Step Three:** The teacher has one student come up to the board and write the carets in the correct places. When this is correct, another student is asked to write the complete sentence on the board below the dehydrated sentence. All the students can then copy the complete sentence on their papers.

^ President lives ^ ^ White House

*The President lives in the White House.*

*Note:* Instead of writing the dehydrated sentences on the board, the teacher can prepare a worksheet of several such sentences. After passing out the worksheet to the class, she proceeds with Step Two, above.

## Technique #2: How Many Words?

*This technique help students learn to hear and write all the words (both content and function words) in a dictated sentence.*

**Step One:** The teacher reads a sentence aloud at a normal rate and asks the students how many words they hear. The teacher should read the sentence aloud three times.

**Step Two:** The students respond nonverbally. They can either hold up their fingers to show the total number of words they hear or hold up a number fan to show the total number of words they hear.

**Step Three:** The teacher asks one student to write the sentence on the board. The class corrects any mistakes and determines together how many words are in the sentence.

## Technique #3: Scrambled Sentences

*This tactile technique helps students review sentences that the adjudicator might read aloud for the writing test.*

Step One: On the board, the teacher writes a sentence likely to be read aloud (dictated) at the citizenship test.

Step Two: The teacher gives the students several blank index cards and asks them to copy the sentence on the board onto the cards, one word per card. The teacher circulates to make sure that spelling and capitalization are correct. It is a good practice to put a period on one of the cards. The students then put the cards into a ziplock baggie or envelope.

Step Three: The teacher repeats Steps One and Two until each student has a collection of three to five sentences in bags or envelopes.

Step Four: The teacher reads one of the sentences aloud, and the students locate and assemble the correct sentence. The teacher may need to repeat the sentence several times.

*Note*: Students can use their scrambled sentences for individual practice at home or in class when they have a few minutes of free time.

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## Technique #4: Living Sentences

*This kinesthetic technique is a variation on the Scrambled Sentence, above. It helps students review sentences that the adjudicator might read aloud (dictate) for the writing test. It also gets students up and moving during long classes.*

Step One: Before class, the teacher selects several sentences likely to be read aloud (dictated) at the citizenship test. She writes one word from each sentence onto a piece of 8 ½ x 11" cardstock. The word cards from each sentence are clipped together with a paperclip or put into a large envelope.

Step Two: During class, the teacher divides the class into groups of 6-10 students. She gives each group one sentence and asks them to assemble the sentence in the correct order.

Step Three: Working together, the students arrange their sentence in order. Then groups take turns coming to the front of the class to make a "living sentence" by facing the class, each student holding a word card so that the sentence is formed correctly. If there are more students than words in the sentence, 2 or 3 students can hold one card.

*Note*: The teacher can have the class make additional sets of word cards for sentences they are studying. The cards can be used for 5-10 minutes of review at every class meeting (Steps Two and Three above).

## Technique #5: Sentence Dictation for Multi-level Groups

*This technique is ideal for classes with students of varied language proficiency levels. Using the same sentences for dictation, the teacher prepares worksheets at different proficiency levels and the students select worksheets that match their ability levels.*

Step One: The teacher selects several sentences likely to be read aloud (dictated) at the citizenship test. Before class, she prepares up to four different worksheets, one for each ability level in the class:

Worksheet A (easiest):	Students circle what they hear.
Worksheet B (easy):	Students write one missing word.
Worksheet C (more difficult):	Students write two missing words.
Worksheet D (most difficult):	Students write the whole sentence.

Note: See example on next page

Step Two: During class, the teacher gives each student the worksheet that best matches his or her level of language proficiency. Alternatively, students can self select the worksheets that best match their levels.

Step Three: The teacher reads the first sentence aloud at a normal rate three times. The students complete their worksheets while they listen. The class can then correct the sentences together.

For example:

For the sentence, "Flag Day is in June" the worksheets look like this:

**Worksheet A: Circle the correct word**

1. Flag Day is in 

May.
June.
July.

*Students using Worksheet A just circle which word they hear.*



**Worksheet B: Write the missing word.**

1. Flag Day is in June.

*Students using Worksheet B fill in one word.*



**Worksheet C: Write the missing words.**

1. Flag Day is June.

*Students using Worksheet C fill in two words.*



**Worksheet D: Write the sentence.**

1. Flag Day is in June.

*Students using Worksheet D write the whole sentence.*

Answers from Page One:  
Example 2: Content words: the, two.  
Function words: vote, right, have, right, vote.  
Example 3: Content words: vote, President, November.  
Function words: in, the.