



Sentence Variety

Adding sentence variety to your writing will do three things: enhance the flow of ideas, intensify points, and sustain the interest of your reader. Varying the length, rhythm and structure of sentences are three ways to create variety and interest in your writing.

A. Vary the length of sentences within the body of a paragraph.

Short Sentences

Short sentences present one idea clearly, but too many of them in succession can make writing seem awkward and simplistic. However, a few well-placed short sentences can add emphasis.

Example

Our senator maintains two elaborate houses, one in our state and one in Washington. Although I understand the reasons for having two homes, owning two \$300,000 residences seems needlessly extravagant. In short, I disapprove.

Remember, if you have a series of short, repetitive sentences, you can connect sentences together with conjunctions or semicolons. Example: He came; he saw; he conquered.

Medium Sentences

Medium-length sentences allow space to connect ideas and add details, while remaining clear and easy to read. Medium-length sentences are the most versatile and should form the core of your writing.

Example

Although I enjoy televised boxing, I am often dissatisfied with network commentaries. All too often sportscasters' comments are superficial, pointing out the obvious—like who is winning—rather than helping me to understand the sport.

Long Sentences

Long sentences establish complex interrelationships and include substantial amounts of amplification and clarification. Use them sparingly to emphasize relationships and to incorporate significant details.

Example

For over a century, the *Statue of Liberty*, in all its majesty, has stood at the entrance to New York Harbor, welcoming immigrants, travelers, and returning Americans and symbolizing the freedoms we value.

B. Use front loaded, end loaded and balanced sentences to vary rhythm and create emphasis.

Front loaded sentences

Present the subject and the verb in the initial position, followed by a variety of modifying phrases.

Example

Dr. Zhivago is a typical David Lean film, with panoramic scenes, larger-than-life characters, and universal implications.

End loaded sentences

Create suspense and emphasis by placing the main idea or some part of it at the end of the sentence.

Example

After having spent thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours renovating the townhouse, the Petersons sold it.

Balanced sentences

Balanced sentences use parallel elements—words, phrases, and sometimes whole clauses—to create interest and emphasis.

Examples

Freud examined dreams, collected narratives, analyzed the accounts, and found patterns of meaning.

Some dreams contained flying, running, and floating, while others contained drowning, restricting, or imprisoning.

C. Vary sentence beginnings using different parts of speech.

Begin with adverbs

The ornithologist cautiously approached the eagle's nest.

Change to:

Cautiously, the ornithologist approached the eagle's nest.

Begin with adjectives

Jason, exhausted and dirty, collapsed in the armchair.

Change to:

Exhausted and dirty, Jason collapsed in the armchair.

Begin with prepositional phrases

The pope did not restrict his travel after the attempt on his life.

Change to:

After the attempt on his life, the pope did not restrict his travel.

Begin with verbal phrases

The monks, worried that the manuscript might be stolen, placed it in a secret vault.

Change to:

Worried that the manuscript might be stolen, the monks placed it in a secret vault.

Adding introductory phrases and/or using passive voice, in which the subject is not the one performing the action of the sentence, can create the problem called DANGLING MODIFIERS.

Example: Worried that it might be stolen, the manuscript was placed in a secret vault.
(Who was worried??) Be sure that your sentence subject matches the introductory phrase.

Sentence Variety Worksheet

I. Give examples of short, medium and long sentences.

Short: _____

Medium: _____

Long: _____

II. Give examples of front loaded, end loaded and balanced sentences to vary rhythm and create emphasis.

Front loaded: _____

End loaded: _____

Balanced: _____

III. Change the sentences below to use introductory words or phrases.

I fortunately had begun my work on Thursday because the power failure on Friday kept me from working on my paper. _____

The three puppies were wet and dirty when they traipsed onto the porch.

Sharon wanted to go to the store before she made the pizza.

I grasped the armrest, sick with fear that we would be thrown from the car, as we hurtled around hairpin curves.

IV. Correcting Dangling Modifiers

Without a thought about tomorrow, the garage door closed behind us.

Afraid that the fireworks would wake the baby, all loud noises were banned.

When in doubt, the judge told the young man to stop and think.

V. Using your knowledge of sentence length, rhythms, and structure, rewrite these sentences.

a. Combine these short sentences into a complex-compound sentence.

I was eating an apple. Dad told me to take out the trash. I asked him to wait a minute.

b. Separate this run-on sentence into a compound sentence, a short sentence, and a complex sentence. You may want to change a few words.

We had been on the boat for two hours it had been a rough time with high waves causing all of us to be seasick because of the rough sea it ended when we hit the reef.

c. Tell the writer of these sentences how to improve their order and structure.

Fish eat plants. They also eat other fish. Some like light and stay close to the top of lakes or oceans, but not all because some swim at the bottom of the sea looking for something to eat in the sand or hide behind rocks. Fish have eyes that can see above them and all around, just not straight on as we look at the world, especially other people when we want to have an important conversation like the one that I had with my Uncle John when he told me all about the fish he has kept in terrariums. I like to study fish.