

Sentence Variety

SUU Writing Center

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Most of the information included in this tip sheet has been suggested by the following sources:

“Sentence Variety.” Online Writing Lab (OWL). Purdue University. 7 June 2004

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_sentvar.html and

Hairston, Maxine, et al. *The Scott Foresman Handbook for Writers*. 7th ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2004. 295-364.

In writing, it is important to vary the way you form your sentences. Too many short or too many complex sentences in a row can make the writing feel monotonous. In this tip sheet you will find several suggestions for varying the way you construct your sentences.

Suggestion	Example
<p>Inverting Sentence Order Basic sentences are constructed in the traditional order: Subject + verb (+ object/complement). This order can be varied to give your sentences freshness.</p>	<p><i>Basic order:</i> A magazine stand sits next to my coffee table.</p> <p><i>Inverted order:</i> Next to my coffee table sits a magazine stand.</p>
<p>Conjunction A conjunction is useful in joining two sentences with similar ideas, thus creating the structure grammarians call a “compound.” Conjunctions (<i>for, as, nor, but, or, yet, so</i>) are preceded by a comma when they join two complete sentences.</p>	<p><i>Two sentences:</i> The movie was much longer than Kara anticipated. She fell asleep twice.</p> <p><i>Compound sentence with a conjunction:</i> The movie was much longer than Kara anticipated, and she fell asleep twice.</p>
<p>Subordinator Adding a subordinator to a sentence makes it into a dependent fragment. Joining two related ideas with a subordinator (for example, <i>after, although, as, because, before, if, since, that, though, unless, until, when, where, whether, which, or while</i>) will help you create varied sentences. Often, subordinators allow you to move the fragment around from the beginning to the end of the main sentence—or even to insert it into the middle. Usage rules say to follow the fragment with a comma when it comes at the start of the sentence. When the fragment comes at the end, the rules say that you can leave out the comma if the clause is short or if it contains nonessential information. When the fragment is inserted in the middle, set it off with commas before and after the clause.</p>	<p><i>Two complete sentences:</i> My alkaline batteries would not work in my digital camera. My camera needs lithium batteries.</p> <p><i>A sentence with a subordinate clause:</i> [Ex. 1] My alkaline batteries would not work in my digital camera because it needs the lithium type. OR [Ex. 2] Because my camera needs lithium batteries, the alkaline type would not work. OR [Ex. 3] Alkaline batteries, because my camera needs the lithium type, would not work.</p>

<p>Participial phrases</p> <p>To write in a more concise style, try condensing sentences into descriptive fragments beginning with <i>-ing</i> or <i>-ed</i> verbs (or other past forms). Just watch out that the doer of the <i>-ing</i> or <i>-ed</i> action, appears as the subject in the main sentence. This sort of sentence can be placed before or after the noun it described.</p>	<p>Using –ing phrases:</p> <p><i>Two complete sentences:</i> The pen was leaking blue ink. The pen ruined Marcus’s essay on William Butler Yeats.</p> <p><i>A sentence with an -ing participial phrase:</i> Leaking blue ink, the pen ruined Marcus’s essay on William Butler Yeats.</p> <p>Using –ed phrases:</p> <p><i>Two complete sentences:</i> The students were sent to PE class. The students perfected the art of basketball.</p> <p><i>A sentence with an past participial phrase:</i> [Ex. 1] Sent to PE class, the students perfected the art of basketball.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">OR</p> <p>[Ex. 2] The students, sent to PE class, perfected the art of basketball.</p>
<p>Prepositional Phrase</p> <p>Prepositional phrases can follow nouns to describe them or move around a sentence to describe verbs. Prepositional phrases include a preposition (such as <i>on</i>, <i>of</i>, <i>around</i>, <i>up</i>, <i>by</i>, or <i>through</i>) and an object. By including a prepositional phrase in the sentence, or by rearranging the position of the prepositional phrase, you can vary the rhythm and structure of your sentences, making them more readable.</p>	<p><i>A sentence with no prepositional phrase:</i> We sat drinking lemonade.</p> <p><i>A sentence including a prepositional phrase:</i> We sat on the front porch drinking lemonade.</p> <p><i>Rearranged position of the prepositional phrase:</i> On the front porch, we sat drinking lemonade.</p>
<p>Relative Clause¹</p> <p>Relative clauses use relative pronouns to combine two sentences that share a noun. Relative clauses start with relative pronouns (<i>which</i>, <i>who</i>, <i>whoever</i>, <i>whom</i>, <i>that</i>, <i>whose</i>). You should note that grammarians say it’s a mistake to refer to people with the pronoun <i>that</i> rather than <i>who</i>.</p>	<p>Using “that”:</p> <p><i>Two complete sentences:</i> I received the ring for Christmas last year. I lost it sampling lotion at the store.</p> <p><i>One sentence that includes a relative clause:</i> I lost the ring that I received for Christmas last year sampling lotion at the store.</p>

¹ For guidelines on punctuating relative clauses, see Writing Center tip sheets on commas and relative clauses.

<p>More examples on relative clauses:</p>	<p>Using “who”: <i>Two complete sentences:</i> My roommate is from Texas. She will be taping injuries for the football team next year.</p> <p><i>One sentence that includes a relative clause:</i> My roommate, who is from Texas, will be taping injuries for the football team next year.</p> <p>Using “which”: <i>Two complete sentences:</i> The wind is especially strong in Cedar City during the summer. It creates problems for bikers and runners.</p> <p><i>One sentence that includes a relative clause:</i> The wind, which is especially strong in Cedar City during the summer, creates problems for bikers and runners</p>
<p>Appositives Appositives are words that describe nouns in the sentence in more detail; in other words, they act as synonyms for the nouns they follow. They are useful in sentence variety because they break up monotonous structure and give your reader more information. Appositives are words or phrases acting as nouns in the sentence.</p>	<p><i>Sentence without an appositive:</i> Today’s assignment was difficult to complete without a manual.</p> <p><i>Sentence with a noun phrase appositive:</i> Today’s assignment, the bibliography for our research papers, was difficult to complete without a manual.</p> <p><i>Sentence with an –ing phrase appositive:</i> Today’s assignment, assembling a bibliography, was difficult to complete without a manual.</p>
<p>Varying the Subject Varying the subject from sentence to sentence is simple way to avoid repetition in your writing. Using this sentence variety technique also forces you to write about different subjects in more creative ways.</p>	<p><i>Two sentences with the same subject:</i> The dog was a friendly creature. He always wagged his tail whenever he met someone new.</p> <p><i>Two sentences with different subjects:</i> The dog was a friendly creature. His tail whirled like a helicopter blade whenever he met someone new.</p>

Working to create varied sentences will improve your writing style tremendously! Always remember that a variation in length is especially important; using all long, complex sentences will not impress your professor much more than using all short, simple sentences. Varying the sentence length is a good trick because this keeps your reader on his/her toes. Mixing short and long sentences together will make you a bold, vivacious writer.