

(last updated 5/18/16)¹

In writing, it is important to vary the way you form your sentences. Too many short or complex sentences in a row can make the writing feel monotonous. In this tip sheet, you will find 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 a “compound sentence.” 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 a dependent clause. Joining two related ideas with a subordinator (<i>after, although, as, because, before, if, since, that, though, unless, etc.</i>) will help you create varied sentences. Subordinators allow you to move the clause around from the beginning to the end of the sentence—or insert it into the middle. Follow the clause with a comma if it starts the sentence. If it comes at the end, you can delete the comma if the clause is short or if it is nonessential. If the clause is in the middle, use commas before and after.</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> My alkaline batteries would not work in the digital camera because it needs the lithium type. OR Because my camera needs lithium batteries, the alkaline type would not work. OR Alkaline batteries, because my camera needs the lithium type, would not work.</p>
<p>Participial phrases To write in a more concise style, try condensing sentences into descriptive phrases beginning with <i>-ing</i> verbs. Just make sure the doer of the <i>-ing</i> action appears as the subject in the sentence. This sort of phrase can be placed before or after the noun it describes.</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>

¹ Most of the information included in this tip sheet has been suggested by the following sources:

“Sentence Variety.” [Online Writing Lab \(OWL\)](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_sentvar.html). 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.

<p>Prepositional Phrase Prepositional phrases follow nouns to describe them, or move around a sentence to describe verbs. Prepositional phrases include a preposition (<i>on, around, up, by, through etc.</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.</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 Clause² Relative clauses use relative pronouns to combine two sentences that share a noun. Relative clauses use relative pronouns (<i>which, who, whoever, whom, that, 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><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>
<p>Appositives Appositives are words that describe the subject 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 noun 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 a more 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. Mixing short and long sentences together will make you a better writer.

² For guidelines on punctuating relative clauses, see Writing Center tipsheets on commas and relative clauses.