

Creating Sentence Variety

Keeping your reader involved can be an intricate dance with many different steps. Good writers fascinate their readers with the rhythm and flow of the language by using a combination of simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. Too many short, simple sentences in a row can blast from the page like the rat-a-tat-tat of a machine gun. Too many long, complex sentences take on the drone of a lazy summer afternoon. Just the right balance of each allows readers to follow with interest and attention.

Example 1

He woke up. He went downstairs. It was cold. The table was set. He sat down. Breakfast was hot. He ate quickly. He stood up. He cleaned his dishes. He went upstairs. He got dressed. It was time to start his day.

The example above shows how too many short sentences can make your writing sound choppy. The opposite happens when you use too many longer, more complex sentences in a row, as in Example 2 on the next page.

Example 2

As he always did, he woke up immediately and went down the steep staircase to the kitchen table. It was cold, but the table was set and breakfast was hot so he sat down and ate quickly. He stood up, cleaned his dishes, went upstairs, and got dressed; it was time to start his day.

Ideally, your writing should combine long and short sentences.

Exercise 1

On the lines below, rewrite the paragraph in Example 1 and 2 using a variety of long and short sentences. As you revise, it may be necessary to combine sentences. As discussed in the last chapter, combining a series of short, choppy sentences into one graceful sentence can transform an entire paragraph. One good sentence can express thoughts and ideas more clearly and succinctly than a couple of bad ones.

_ Conjunctions

Conjunctions are words that connect words, phrases, and clauses. The most common conjunctions are *and*, *but*, and *or*.

Example

Did you eat the last shrimp? Did you give it to someone else?

You is the subject of both sentences. Conjunctions can be used to eliminate repetition; in the example above, the combined sentence uses the subject only once.

Edited Example

Did you eat the last shrimp or give it to someone else?

In the example above, the part of the sentence after the conjunction, *give it to someone else*, is now a phrase. When you combine sentences using a conjunction, and the two sentences remain complete sentences after they have been combined, use a comma before the conjunction.

Edited Example

Did you eat the last shrimp, or did you give it to someone else?

Because the part of the sentence that follows the conjunction has both a subject and a predicate, it is an independent clause (also known as a complete sentence). Therefore, a comma appears before the conjunction.

Exercise 2

Circle the best conjunction to combine each sentence pair.

1. Joe loves watching television. He hates soap operas.

- a. and
- b. but
- c. or

2. We can drive to San Francisco. We can take an airplane.

- a. and
- b. but
- c. or

3. The driver lost the map. The driver found the house anyway.

- a. and
- b. but

c. or

4. The cowboys rounded up the cows. The cowboys put the cows in the corral.

a. and

b. but

c. or

5. The carpenter built a chair. The carpenter built a footstool.

a. and

b. but

c. or

Overuse of Conjunctions

Conjunctions help us to combine sentences, but they can be overused, creating sentences that are too long.

Example

The drawbridge is raised, and the knights all take their positions along the battlement, and the king returns to the map room.

Edited Example

Raising the drawbridge, the knights all take their positions along the battlement while the king returns to the map room.

Another simple conjunction, *so*, is sometimes incorrectly used to begin sentences.

Example

So, the author used the literary technique of personification in her poem.

Edited Example

The author used the literary technique of personification in her poem.

So can be used to combine sentences, but it often sounds informal. You should be careful about using it too much in academic or formal writing. Generally, the proper way to use *so* is to combine it with *and* or *that* to form the phrases *and so* and *so that*.

Example

Rebecca wanted to improve her Spanish, so she moved to Mexico.

Edited Examples

Rebecca moved to Mexico because she wanted to improve her Spanish.
Rebecca wanted to improve her Spanish, and so she moved to Mexico.

Dividing Sentences

Long sentences connected by conjunctions can be revised by dividing them into two sentences. Remember, the goal is to use a variety of sentence lengths to give your writing an interesting rhythm and flow.

Example

I am a big tennis fan, and so I like to watch the matches on T.V. and sometimes I have a chance to see good tennis live and I try to get the best seats.

Edited Example

As a big tennis fan, I like to watch matches on T.V.
When I have the chance to see good tennis live, I try to get the best seats.

Exercise 3

Revise the following sentences by using phrases and clauses to eliminate unnecessary conjunctions.

6. Our trip to Daniel's Seaside Resort took four hours, and the air conditioning did not work in the car, so we had to roll down the windows and a bee flew in.

7. The resort was smaller than we expected and more rustic, so we stayed in the main lodge most of the time and we played a lot of ping pong and we sat by the empty fireplace and talked.

8. We went outside and the sun burned my skin and the mosquitoes were everywhere, so we went back inside and we swam in the indoor pool and sat in the hot tub until our fingers were wrinkled.

9. The game room had lots of video games and it had pinball and it had air hockey, so we took turns playing the games and watched while the others played.

10. Our summer trip ended too soon and we would like to go back and stay at the same place and in the same room next time, and we promise we will spend more time outside next year.

Rearranging Sentences

Sometimes rearranging two short sentences can make one good sentence.

Example

The food is in the refrigerator. The food is from the Chinese restaurant.

Edited Example

The food from the Chinese restaurant is in the refrigerator.

In this example, the prepositional phrase *from the Chinese restaurant* is combined with the other sentence to make one sentence that is not choppy.

When combining sentences like this, you must occasionally add *-ing*, *-ed*, or *-ly* to one of the words.

Example

We saw a duck. The duck quacked at some geese.

Edited Example

We saw a duck quacking at some geese.

The rearranged words may need to be separated by a comma.

Example

Willie Mays hit many home runs in his career.

Willie Mays was an outfielder.

Edited Example

Willie Mays, an outfielder, hit many home runs in his career.

You may have noticed that combined sentences often use *verbal phrases*, such as participial phrases, gerund phrases, infinitive phrases, and appositives as discussed in Lesson 3. Using these to combine two sentences can make for one graceful sentence. When they are used too much in one sentence, however, the sentence will be choppy.

Exercise 4

Combine the following sentences by rearranging them. Write the new sentence on the line.

11. The garden is overgrown. The garden is at the back of the house.

12. Did you see that basketball player at the mall? The basketball player was tall.

13. I caught a frog. The frog hopped across the path.

14. Ace Green is a big donor to the public radio station. Ace Green is a local businessman.

Varying Sentence Beginnings

Not only can you vary the length of your sentences, but you can vary the way they begin. This, too, will make your writing appeal to your reader. Normally, a simple sentence begins with the subject and ends with the predicate. It is very direct, which is good. Your reader won't get confused reading sentences in which you have directly linked the subject and predicate. However, a long run of these sentences may bore your reader.

Example

Ferns can add quality and texture to an ordinary garden. There are many different varieties. Ferns can be bought in nurseries or by mail order.

Edited Example

Ferns can add quality and texture to an ordinary garden. To order any number of varieties, visit your local nursery or peruse a mail order catalog.

Single-Word Modifiers

Single-word modifiers used at the beginning of a sentence can help with variety and emphasis.

Example

Quite a few students have been taking performing arts classes recently.

Edited Example

Recently, quite a few students have been taking performing arts classes.

Phrase Modifiers

Phrases can modify sentences and come at the beginning in place of the subject of the sentence for emphasis and variety.

Example

Joe lived in Chicago when he received his Master's degree and decided to become a teacher.

Edited Example

Living in Chicago, Joe received his Master's degree and decided to become a teacher.

In the above example, a *participial phrase*, as discussed in Lesson 3, begins the sentence.

Example

Wendy Nguyen wrote three different essays to win the prize.

Edited Example

To win the prize, Wendy Nguyen wrote three different essays.

In the above example, an *infinitive phrase* begins the sentence to offer variety.

Example

The shadows can frighten you in the woods.

Edited Example

In the woods, the shadows can frighten you.

In the above example, a *prepositional phrase* begins the sentence.

Adverbial Phrases

An adverbial phrase is a prepositional phrase that modifies a verb, an adjective, or another adverb.

Examples of an adverbial phrase modifying a verb

Shara sings *in the shower*.

The prepositional phrase tells *where* she sings, so it is acting as an adverb.

Tom paints *with a fine brush*.

The prepositional phrase tells *how* he paints, so it is acting as an adverb.

Any time a prepositional phrase answers the questions *how, when, where, to what extent, and why*, it is an adverbial phrase.

Example of an adverbial phrase modifying an adjective

He is respectful *to his elders*.

The phrase *to his elders* modifies the adjective *respectful*.

Example of an adverbial phrase modifying an adverb

The ship listed far *to the starboard*.

The phrase *to the starboard* modifies the adverb *far*.

To offer variety, adverbial phrases can begin sentences.

Example

Before a race, Liam stretches

Clause Modifiers

Clauses can also be used at the beginning of a sentence.

Example

The roadie, when he heard the announcer introducing the band, worked quickly to tune the guitar.

Edited Example

When he heard the announcer introducing the band, the roadie worked quickly to tune the guitar.

Example

Detectives continue to search the crime scene for evidence because there have been no clues found so far.

Edited Example

Because there have been no clues found so far, detectives continue to search the crime scene for evidence.

Exercise 5

Circle the letter of the sentence in each group that begins with a single-word modifier, a phrase modifier, or a clause modifier and on the line provided, write the type of modifier that is used.

- 15. a.** In the boardroom, the discussion strayed from the planned agenda.
b. Tarzan and Jane swung through the jungle.
c. Many people do not believe in ghosts.

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- 16. a.** A tornado set down in Oklahoma last month.
b. The proud parents took pictures of their son.
c. Lately, the weather has been warmer than usual this time of year.
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- 17. a.** When the fifth-grader ate the sour candy, all of the first-graders watched.
b. Oscar paid the rent.
c. “Burnt Sienna” is my least favorite crayon color.
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- 18. a.** Josh laughed at the sight of the miniature golf course.
b. To sit through a long play can be difficult for a child.
c. Yesterday was not my day.
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- 19. a.** From that time on, the aqueducts brought water to Athens.
b. Murphy's fish bait lures trout very well.
c. The rose bush caught my pant leg.
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- 20. a.** The telephone would not stop ringing.
b. A crash course in sweeping would help Joan.
c. Recently, my supervisor has been giving me more responsibility.
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- 21. a.** The mountain slope looked like a challenge to climb.
b. Because he ate too much pie, Sebastian had to lie down.
c. The modern welfare state is a result of the Great Depression.
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If you know several different ways to begin sentences, you can choose when they are appropriate. Remember, the idea is to find a balance between being clear and being monotonous. Different sentence beginnings can help with both clarity and variety.