

## Sentence Variety

Writing is composed of various portions including the audience, the purpose, and the method or style. As you write, you are writing for a specific group of people and have a specific goal in mind. Those elements determine the style or the genre of the document you are creating. You must keep your audience engaged with your writing in order to ensure that they receive your message and understand your purpose.

In order to generate interest in your texts, you need to adopt a style that will engage your readers without losing sight of your end goal. One of the ways you can do this is by using various types of sentences and alternating the way you place them.

### *Clauses*

A clause is a basic grammatical unit consisting of a subject and a verb. A clause may be *independent*, meaning that it can stand on its own as a sentence, or *dependent*, meaning that it depends on an independent clause to complete its thought. A dependent clause begins with a subordinating word, or a word that limits the clause.

*Independent: The Nestlé Company grosses over 1.2 billion dollars a year.*

This is a complete thought. The subject (The Nestlé Company) and the verb (grosses) work together to create a stand-alone clause.

*Dependent: When the Nestlé Company grosses over 1.2 billion dollars a year.*

This is not a complete thought. Though it has the same subject and verb, the clause is subordinated – or made dependent on another idea – through the use of the word “when.” This leaves the reader asking “The Nestlé Company grosses 1.2 billion dollars – and what occurs when that happens?”

*Independent: The fellowship will be distributed based on whoever has the best grades.*

This is a complete thought. The noun (fellowship) and the verb (will be distributed – a multipart verb) work together to produce a complete thought.

*Dependent: Whoever has the best grades.*

This clause has a subject (whoever) and a verb (has), but is not a complete idea. The reader needs to know what happens to the person with the best grades. Because there is a subordinating word that creates a question in the mind of the reader, this is a dependent clause.

### *Sentence Types*

There are four different types of sentences. These types are based on the way in which clauses – both dependent and independent – are used in the construction of the sentence.

1. Simple sentence: A simple sentence is composed of a single independent clause. These are a good choice for a writer wanting to focus on or add emphasis to a specific piece of information.
  - *There are six types of monkeys at the zoo.* (Subject: Monkeys, Verb: Are)
  - *Andrea Lunsford writes high volume grammar books.* (Subject: Andrea Lunsford, Verb: Writes)
  - *Get back here!* (Subject: Understood “You,” Verb: Get).
  
2. Compound sentence: A compound sentence has two independent clauses that are equally joined. A compound sentence should be used when the writer wants to lend equal weight to two or more different ideas.
  - *The handbook was expensive, but I had to buy it.* (Subject 1: Handbook, Verb 1: was. Subject 2: I, Verb 2: had to buy).
  - *Jeannie was pleased with her new computer; having extra processing power meant she could run more programs.* (Subject 1: Jeannie, Verb 1: was pleased. Subject 2: Having, Verb 2: meant).
  - *Don't bother with the dog – he is always grumpy.* (Subject 1: Understood “you,” Verb 1: bother. Subject 2: he, verb 2: is).

Compound sentences can be joined in a variety of ways. A dash or a semicolon provides connecting punctuation without the need for additional words. A comma can be used, but only if it is used in conjunction with a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, yet, so). Remember not to use conjunctions at random, as each creates a different meaning. A dash indicates a leading idea where the first idea flows into the second one. A “but” would indicate opposites while an “and” would indicate similar ideas.

3. Complex sentence: A complex sentence is composed of one independent clause and at least one dependent clause. The dependent clause may be at the beginning, middle, or end of the dependent clause. Complex sentences allow a writer to indicate which points the reader should focus on by making the main points stand alone.
  - *After we arrived there, the hurricane began in earnest.* (Independent subject: hurricane, Independent verb: began. Dependent subject: we, Dependent verb: arrived).
  - *The award belongs to whoever earns the most points.* (Independent subject: award, Independent verb: belongs. Dependent subject: whoever, Dependent verb: earns).

- *Because the investors pulled out, the scheme failed.* (Independent subject: scheme, Independent verb: failed. Dependent subject, investors, Dependent verb: pulled out.)
4. Compound-complex sentence: A compound-complex sentence joins these two types of sentences. It contains at least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause. Compound-complex sentences contain the most information, but should be used carefully to avoid overwhelming or confusing the reader.
- *After the storm passed, the residents were left to rebuild; they did it wholeheartedly.* (Independent Subject 1: the residents, Independent verb 1: were left. Independent subject 2: they, Independent verb 2: did. Dependent subject 1: storm, Dependent verb 1: passed)
  - *Jeremiah failed his test, but because he was such a dedicated student, the teacher gave him a second chance.* (Independent subject 1: Jeremiah, Independent verb 1: failed. Independent subject 2: teacher, Independent verb 2: gave. Dependent subject 1: he, Dependent verb 1: was).

### *Sentence Function*

A sentence can act in four different ways – as a statement, question, command or exclamation. While using some variety in function is important, the function of a sentence will almost always be guided by the larger purpose and goals of the assignment.

-Declarative sentence: A declarative sentence states a fact:

*The bracelet was made of silver.*

*After having a cold, Emily had a lot of work to catch up on.*

-Interrogative sentence: An interrogative sentence asks a question:

*How long is it until football seasons starts?*

*Are you really going to wear that to the party tonight?*

-Imperative sentence: An imperative sentence issues a command:

*Stand up straight!*

*Don't even think about playing baseball in the house.*

-Exclamatory: An exclamatory sentence expresses strong emotion.

*The church is beautiful!*

*That hurts!*

(Exclamatory sentences do not always follow the subject-verb rule of sentence construction. An exclamatory sentence may be only a few words: *Ouch! Oh my! etc.*)

*Creating variety in writing*

The best way to keep your writing interesting is to vary the sentence types and – whenever possible – vary the sentence function. Alternating between the different types not only keeps your reader engaged with your writing, it also allows you to emphasize the most important pieces of information and downplay less crucial material.

Keeping things cool is one of the best inventions of this century. Air conditioners keep houses cool. Refrigerators keep food cold. Temperature controls keep cars cool. This may seem expensive. It requires a lot of electricity. Power is a commodity. Really, it saves money. Food lasts longer. People are more productive. Transportation is more effective. The ability to control cold is clearly important.

The previous paragraph uses only simple sentences. Not only is it monotonous to read, but the author has also failed to give the reader clues about what is the most important information. In order to fix this paragraph, the writer needs to determine which ideas are foundational to the paragraph and which simply provide examples. By subordinating some ideas, the writer will be able to create variety and emphasize key ideas.

The ability to control temperature is one of the best inventions of this century. From air conditioners to refrigerators to temperature controls, we have developed the power to keep things cool. At first, the amount of electricity these inventions use may seem expensive, especially given how precious a commodity power is. However, the long term effects save consumers money, as food lasts longer and comfortable conditions allow people to be more productive and efficient in their work and travel. There's no way around it: the ability to control cold is clearly important.

This paragraph has taken all of the ideas from the original paragraph and ranked them in order of importance. The ability to keep things cool is more important than the examples of inventions that do so. Thus, the examples have been put in a dependent clause and the power itself in an independent clause.

Sentence types have also been varied to allow the writer to emphasize key ideas. The first sentence is a simple sentence, directly stating the topic of the entire paragraph. Because it has a single idea, it stands out from the other sentences. The sentences with longer examples or lists are compound, complex, or compound-complex, allowing the writer to include more details but also suggesting that these ideas are subordinate to the main topic.

Notice also that some words have been changed and others removed entirely. Changing sentences from simple to other types may allow the writer to eliminate extra words and phrases. At the same time, some clauses or transitions may need to be added to help make the connection between ideas clear.