

16.1 Using Varied Sentence Lengths and Styles

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the value of varied sentence lengths within a body of text.
2. Use a variety of sentence beginnings and endings.
3. Recognize different sentence styles.

Text written with only one type of sentence is boring for readers. To make your texts more interesting, you should use sentences of varying lengths, with different openings and endings, and with a variety of structures.

Featuring Short Sentences

Short sentences, when not overused, can be used to emphasize an idea and catch a reader's attention. Notice how the ideas expressed through the following short sentences grab your attention more than the same ideas do when embedded in longer sentences.

Ideas separated into shorter sentences: My mother wants me to spend next weekend with her and my two aunts. They all talk nonstop. I am sure I would be nothing more than a fly on the wall while they talk about all the family members. I am simply not going!

Ideas embedded in longer sentences: My mother wants me to spend next weekend with her and my two aunts who all talk nonstop. I am sure I would be nothing more than a fly on the wall while they talk about all the family members, so I am simply not going!

But you need to be careful to choose your short sentences strategically so that they carry emphasis without making your writing appear unsophisticated. A third option might be to use one longer sentence and break up the other one into two shorter sentences.

Combining Short Sentences

Since an abundance of short sentences will give a simplistic appearance to your writing, you don't want to use an excessive number of them close together. You can combine short sentences as a means of explaining an idea or a connection between two ideas. When you combine two complete sentences, you have to choose to either subordinate one of the ideas to the other or coordinate the two ideas by giving them equal weight. Your choice should always reflect the intended emphasis and **causality** of the two initial sentences.

Example

Two short sentences: My television is broken. It is Karen's fault.

Sentence combination that maintains intended emphasis and causality:
Because of Karen, my television is broken.

Incorporating Sentences of Varying Lengths

Text of varying lengths is easier to read than text where the sentences are all about the same length. A whole page of extremely long sentences is overwhelming. Try reading a high-level academic paper on a scientific topic. The sentences are often long and involved, which results in difficult reading. A whole page of very short sentences, on the other hand, is choppy and seems unsophisticated.

Consider the following text that begins the first chapter of Mark Twain's *A Tramp Abroad*. Twain begins with a long sentence (thirty-three words), follows with a medium-length sentence (seventeen words), and closes with two short sentences (six and five words, respectively). This mix of sentence lengths creates text that flows smoothly and is easy to read.

One day it occurred to me that it had been many years since the world had been afforded the spectacle of a man adventurous enough to undertake a journey through Europe on foot. After much thought, I decided that I was a person fitted to furnish to mankind this spectacle. So I determined to do it. This was in March, 1878.

Now read a different version of the same paragraph. Notice how the short sentences sound choppy and juvenile.

I was thinking one day. I thought of something the world hadn't seen lately. My thought was of an adventurous man. The man was on a walking trip through Europe. I thought some more. Then I decided that I should take such a trip. I should give the world something to watch. So I determined to do it. This was in March 1878.

Here's another version of the same paragraph written in one long and rather overwhelming sentence.

One day it occurred to me that it had been many years since the world had been afforded the spectacle of a man adventurous enough to undertake a journey through Europe on foot, so after much thought, I decided that I was a person fitted to furnish to mankind this spectacle, and it was in March 1878 that I decided I was determined to do it.

Diversifying Your Sentence Openers and Endings

Like making all your sentences the same length, starting all your sentences in the same format—say, with “the” or “there”—could result in seriously boring text. Even if you vary your openings slightly but still follow the basic subject-verb-object format every time, you're missing an opportunity to make your sentences more interesting. Study how the following **techniques** for varying the **sentence openers** add interest.

Example 1

All sentences begin with one or two words:

Original: The girl was terribly upset when her purse was stolen. There wasn't anything that could get the image out of her mind. The thief was running when he grabbed her purse. The girl didn't see him coming and was caught off guard. The girl

fell down and never got a good look at him.

Revision: [Reverse the sentence.] Having her purse stolen upset the girl terribly. [Start with the key issue.] Her mind held onto the image and would not let it go. [Add an adverb.] Unfortunately, she didn't see him coming and was so caught off guard that she fell down and never got a good look at him.

Example 2

Sentences begin with a variety of words but all follow the subject-verb-object format:

Original: The young woman got up off the ground. Then she ran to her dorm room in a state of shock. She got in the elevator without looking at anyone. She started crying as soon as she walked into her room. Her roommate held her hand and tried to get her to calm down. Some friends from down the hall showed up.

Revision: The young woman got up off the ground. [Rearrange to create an introductory phrase.] In a state of shock, she ran to her dorm room. [Insert an adjective at the beginning.] Frightened, she got in the elevator without looking at anyone. [Choose an unusual subject for the sentence.] Tears came as soon as she walked into her room. [Rearrange to create an introductory phrase.] In an effort to calm her down, her roommate held her hand. [Add some new content at the beginning of the sentence.] As timing would have it, some friends from down the hall showed up.

By placing a key word or phrase at the end of a sentence, you can also hold readers' attention as they wait for the full meaning to unfold. This approach of building to a climax places added emphasis on an idea.

Example 1

The old battle-ax looked like she was about to start yelling at everybody, so I held my breath right up until the moment she broke into a wide grin.

Example 2

The whole family gathered around the computer waiting for my sister to say the words we'd been waiting to hear for fifteen months—that she was coming home.

Including Sentences with Differing Structures

Just as you need to use a variety of sentence openers to keep text interesting, you should vary your sentence structure. The types of clauses you use are key factors in varying your sentence structure. Look at the following table for an overview.

Table 16.1 Varying Sentence Types Based on Clauses

Sentence Type	Number and Type of Clauses	Example [Independent Clauses Underlined, Dependent Clauses in Bold]
Simple sentence	One independent clause	Ted threw the bat.
Compound sentence	Two independent clauses	Ted threw the bat, and it hit the umpire.
Complex sentence	One independent clause <i>and</i> one or more dependent clauses	While wincing in pain , the umpire ejected Ted, causing the manager to protest .
Compound-complex sentence	At least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause	Losing control of his emotions , Ted threw the ball, and it nearly hit the umpire too.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Using a variety of sentence lengths helps make text interesting.
- Varying your sentence beginnings helps keep texts from being too monotonous.
- Using a mix of sentence structures makes text more inviting and engaging.
- You can use short sentences to create emphasis.
- You can add emphasis by placing key words and terms at the ends of sentences and as the last word in a series.
- You can also add emphasis to a sentence with paired ideas by strategically aligning words with the ideas.

EXERCISES

1. Write a series of three sentences that include two longer sentences and a shorter sentence used for emphasis. Vary the placement of the shorter sentence in the sequence and consider the effect on the sentence.
2. Combine the following two sentences into one sentence where the relationship between the two ideas is emphasized:

In size, Idaho is the fourteenth-largest state in the United States.

In population, Idaho ranks thirty-ninth in the United States.
3. Write a sentence with a series where the last item in the series is the most impressive or startling.
4. Compare “hourly workers” and “salary workers” in a sentence using either like words or paired words to emphasize the two ideas.
5. Write a paragraph about a childhood memory. Include about one-third short sentences (seven or fewer words), one-third medium sentences (between twelve and twenty-four words), and one-third long sentences (more than twenty-five words). Include at least ten sentences. After each sentence, include the number of words in parentheses.
6. Write a paragraph about something you have done during the last couple of weeks. Do not use more than two sentences with the same format or opening phrasing. Include at least eight sentences.
7. Write a paragraph about your family. From [Table 16.1 "Varying Sentence Types Based on Clauses"](#), use each of the four sentence types at least once. After the paragraph, include a chart showing each of the sentence types and your matching usage.

