



Sentence Variety

Varying sentence length is important in any kind of writing. It allows the writer to better combine ideas and thus better show the relationship between ideas. It also benefits the reader, who can become easily bored with multiple sentences of the same length and the same basic pattern. To vary sentence length, one must first understand the four types of sentences and the grammatical units that create each of them.

First, let's relearn some grammar terminology. The core grammatical unit of all sentences is *the independent clause*. An independent clause is a group of related words that has a subject, a verb and presents a complete thought; that is, it can stand on its own as a sentence. The *dependent clause* is the next most important grammatical unit when it comes to sentence construction. A *dependent clause* (also known as a subordinate clause) is also a group of related words with a subject and verb, but this unit, unlike independent clauses, *cannot* stand on its own as a sentence because it begins with a dependent (subordinate) word, making it *dependent* on its connection to an independent clause to convey its full meaning. *Phrases* of various types usually make up any additional parts of a sentence. With that terminology clear, let's look at the four types of sentences:

Simple

Sentence: A simple sentence is composed of a single independent clause.

Example: Elaine left her purse on the table.

Compound

Sentence: A compound sentence is composed of two or more independent clause linked with a semicolon, or more commonly, a comma plus one of the seven coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). Note: without proper connective punctuation, the compound sentence will be considered a run-on sentence.

Example: Elaine left her purse on the table; someone stole it.

Example: Elaine left her purse on the table, *and* someone stole it.

Complex

Sentence: A complex sentence is composed of one independent clause and at least one dependent clause. It is up to the writer which order the clauses appear in, depending on style and emphasis. But remember, if the dependent clause precedes the independent clause, the dependent clause should be followed by a comma.

Ind. clause

Dep. Clause

Example: Elaine's purse was stolen | because she left it on the table.

Dep. Clause

Ind. Clause

Example: Because Elaine left her purse on the table, | it was stolen.

Compound-Complex

Sentences: Compound-Complex Sentences, as the name suggests, are a combination of the compound sentence and the complex sentence. Thus they are made up of two or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.

Over →

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Ind. Clause **Dep. Clause** **Ind. Clause.**
Example: Elaine's purse was stolen | because she left it on the table; | she was very angry.

Strategy:

Writers should combine sentences in the way that best expresses the logical relationship between those sentences. How best to do this is up to the writer, however. Unfortunately there are no magic formulas. But here are some things to keep in mind.

- * Periods and semicolons do nothing to explain the relationship between the ideas found in the word groups being connected. The interpretation of that relationship is left entirely up to the reader, whose interpretation may or may not accurately reflect the goals of the writer. Thus, unless the relationship between ideas is obvious, they should be separated with merely a period or semicolon.
- * Just as too many simple sentences can damage a writer's ability to communicate, so too can having too many compound and complex sentences. Sentence length should vary.