

Sentence Structure, Variety, and Clarity

Sentence Structure

Sentences both deliver the content and contribute clarity to the content. They can also augment the content by providing emphasis or a sense of balance. All of this work occurs behind-the-scenes, so to speak, in the realm of sentence structure. A good understanding of sentence structure gives you the tools to shift emphasis, indicate how two ideas relate to each other, and draw your reader along through the logic of your content.

English sentences follow four different structures: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. [The four sentence types are created](#) out of various combinations of [independent clauses](#), [dependent clauses](#), and punctuation. The examples below show how the various structures work with a simple topic and fairly short, uncomplicated sentences, but the longer, more complicated sentences often found in academic writing still adhere to these four sentence types.

Sentence Type	Example	Explanation
Simple	The dog ate my homework.	one independent clause
Compound	The dog ate my homework, but the cat simply napped.	two independent clauses, in this case joined by a comma and a <i>conjunction</i>
Complex	<u>After the dog ate my homework</u> , the cat napped.	one <u>dependent</u> clause and one independent clause
Compound-Complex	Compound-Complex: <u>After the dog ate my homework</u> , the cat napped , <i>but I had to redo the assignment.</i>	one <u>dependent</u> clause and two independent clauses

Sentence Variety

Writers should use sentence structure purposely and to vary their structure to clearly communicate content to their reader. Not doing so causes problems for readers.

For instance, a series of short, simple sentences can sound like a drumbeat, very repetitious. This is often called “choppy” writing. Similarly, a series of compound sentences in a row can make a reader feel like they are drowning in words without any clear sense of how the ideas really connect. In contrast to this problematic usage of sentence structure, a series of complex or compound sentences followed by a simple sentence results in that simple sentence landing with a resounding boom—it receives a lot of **emphasis** by virtue of its simplicity contrasting sharply with the complexity of the earlier sentences. If you-the-writer have put in that final simple sentence the most important thing you want readers to understand, then its placement following those other longer sentences gives it added emphasis. If, instead, you have stuck that important thing within a compound or complex sentence, you will have robbed it of that emphasis.

A second way to use sentence structure purposely involves careful thought about your mixture of independent and dependent clauses, or your use of complex and compound sentences. In a compound sentence that uses a comma-conjunction pairing, since both halves of the sentence are independent clauses, they carry equal weight with a reader. This one thing AND this other thing. This one thing BUT that other thing. The two parts are equal. In contrast, using a dependent clause for one of the two things reduces the weight of that thing (subordinates it) compared to the other thing. In a sense, the dependent clause is saying “here’s this extra bit of information,” and the independent clause is saying “I’m the important part.” So, when you join two pieces of information into a single sentence, choose which sentence structure will accurately represent the relationship of those two pieces to each other.

When people talk about the importance of sentence variety in a document, these are the kinds of situations they mean. At the very least, a mix of these four sentence types contributes interest to the reading itself; at best, the mix is purposeful for reasons such as putting emphasis in the correct place or indicating the relevant weight of the different pieces of information.

It is important to note that different fields of study have different tolerance levels for the four types of sentences. In particular, different sections of a paper (e.g., methods section

vs. literature review) might require different sentence structure. So, as you do a genre analysis of any document, don't forget to pay attention to sentence structure.

Sentence Clarity

Sentence clarity depends on choices a writer makes about **the language** used in the sentence. For instance, overuse of [nominalizations \(the noun form of verbs\)](#) causes writing to be less clear than when the verbs are left to carry the action of the sentence.

Another potential cause of unclear sentences is long strings of prepositional phrases. The Purdue OWL has material that covers various ways [to improve sentence clarity](#) and [to make your writing more concise](#), which will also improve clarity.

Activity: Sentence Structure as Revision Tool

Learning objective: To identify sentences by type as a first step toward choosing a sentence type purposely for a reason when writing.

Directions

Step 1: In the table on the following page, for each sentence on the left, identify which type of sentence structure it uses. Note that academic writing will look more complicated than the examples shown in the material above, but they still follow the same structures. Hint: Identify independent clauses and dependent clauses. Additional hint: There are two of each type of sentence structure.

Sentence Type

Because National Guard housing was outsourced, participants lived in Indiana and the surrounding states, but a majority of the participants resided in Indiana.

The remainder of the Introduction explores in greater detail the need for such training, examines the disconnects that exist between theory and practice, and highlights existing literature on general consultant training.

When Hoge et al. (2004) conducted their research, the prevalence of major depressive symptoms, generalized anxiety, and PTSD was significantly higher in Iraq veterans after combat than before the tour.

Equipping consultants to work with multilingual writers requires a more complex view of the consultation situation; in particular, it requires that we look beyond the conspicuous problem of grammar and see all three parties involved in each session.

The up-tempo in number of deployments has deployed more service members more often.

While the actual organizational pattern may not transfer from the L1 writing to the L2, the knowledge that one may need to write according to accepted notions of organization and the skill to play around with organizational patterns in order to meet those conventions do transfer, so the writer has an advantage over another L2 writer who was not fully literate in the L1.

Three fourths of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans reported having familial issues during reintegration, and these rates were higher for veterans who experienced depressive and posttraumatic stress symptoms (Sayers et al., 2009).

Although Harris and Silva (1993) offered guidance for consultants on topics as varied as prioritizing among errors, setting goals, and resisting the urge to tell, writing centers today face much the same situation as the one that Harris and Silva were attempting to ameliorate.

Step 2: Now look through a document you have written and identify the types of sentences you use (you might want to color code them). What do you notice? How many of each type do you use? Do the types you use contribute meaning or were they just accidental?

Step 3: Find a place where you have 2 simple sentences in a row. Think about the relationship between them. If they are equal in weight, combine them into a compound sentence with a comma and conjunction (e.g., and, but). If one is more important, combine them into a complex sentence by making the less important one a dependent clause. Does combining them improve the clarity of your point?

Step 4: Find a place where you have a long, complicated sentence that is also any type other than simple (either complex, compound, or compound-complex). Separate the sentence into a series of short simple sentences. Does that make it easier to understand? Think about how the pieces relate to one another. Which sentence structure will best support that relationship? Try rewriting the sentence based on that and see what happens.

Activity: Making Your Writing Concise

Learning objective: To practice methods of making writing more concise while balancing the length of a sentence with the clarity of that sentence.

Directions

Open [this document that explains the exercise](#). Once you have combined all of the sentences at the bottom of the page into a single sentence, edit the sentence to make it as short as possible while still preserving the meaning of the sentence.

Answer Key for Sentence Structure Exercise

Compound-Complex

Simple

Complex

Compound

Simple

Compound-Complex

Compound

Complex