



## Sentence Variety

### Sentence Length.

- Short sentences can be used to emphasize an idea. They are powerful.
- Longer sentences are best used to convey complex ideas. When an idea contains many interlocking parts, the relationship between the parts is better conveyed through the use of a longer sentence.

### Varying Sentence Openings.

A sentence's opening can consist of various elements other than the subject.

- **Transitional expressions** can be used to show chronological order, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, place, etc. They include words like *first, next, finally, in addition*, etc. Phrases can also be used.

*Example: On Friday morning she woke up early.*

The phrase "On Friday morning" can go at the beginning of the sentence and set the time period for the action.

- **Prepositional Phrases** contains a preposition and the noun it connects to the rest of the sentence.

A preposition connects a noun or pronoun with the rest of the sentence; prepositions include words like *at, in, for, above, below*, etc.

*Example: Instead of saying She wrote her paper at the computer, you could say At the computer, she wrote her paper.*

- **Verbal Phrases** are made up of a verbal and a modifier, object, or complement.

A verbal is a verb form that functions as participle, an infinitive, or a gerund — in other words, a form of the verb which does not act like a verb.

*Example: Instead of writing She came to the CWS because she wanted to perfect her paper, you could write, Wanting to perfect her paper, she came to the CWS.*

- **Absolute Phrases** include a noun or pronoun and a participle. They modify the whole sentence instead of one word.

*Example: Instead of writing She left the CWS happy because she finished her paper, you could write, Her paper written, she left the CWS happy.*

- **Dependent Clauses** have a subject and a predicate but cannot stand on its own as sentence.

*Example: Instead of writing I whistled a jaunty tune while I was waiting at the CWS, try writing While I was waiting at the Writing Center, I whistled a jaunty tune.*



## Sentence Variety continued

### Varying Sentence Types.

- **Grammatical Types:**
  - Simple sentence example: *This sentence is an independent clause.*
  - Compound-complex sentence example: *This sentence is called a compound-complex sentence because of the number of clauses, and it is usually longer than a simple sentence.*
  - You typically want to include more complex ideas in sentences with more clauses. By varying the number of clauses, you can vary the sentence structure.
- **Functional Types:** There are four functional types — declarative (making a statement), interrogative (asking a question), exclamatory (expressing a strong feeling), and imperative (giving a command). Declarative sentences are most common, but the others can be used for variety. Sentence variety is fun! Isn't it? Say it is!

**Rhetorical Types:** You can vary whether the main idea appears at the beginning or the end of the sentence.

- Periodic sentences put the main idea at the end of the sentence.  
This kind of sentence can be useful in adding suspense or shocking the reader.  
Example- *He destroyed the world because he hated his sister and her little dog too.* You could rewrite the sentence this way: *Because he hated his sister and her little dog, he destroyed the world.*
- Cumulative sentences begin with an independent clause, then add details.  
This construction puts the main idea first and supports it with phrases containing details. Cumulative sentences are useful when you want to get your main point out on paper, and then offer your support. Rather than attempting to create suspense or extra emphasis, your goal is clarity. Take for example, the sentence *He decided to destroy the world and gathered all the materials he would need: a plastic cup, a garden hose, a jelly bean, and a large quantity of fertilizer.* The main idea is that he is going to destroy the world, and that idea is the first thing in the sentence; the sentence also offers detail on what he will use to accomplish his task.



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## S NO. 2 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### The Semicolon

Semicolons can be used in two ways:

1. **To join together two related statements of equal weight and importance into one sentence.**

*Example:* It is important to proofread your work before turning it in; typos and other mistakes can make you seem careless.

- The purpose of the semicolon in this case is to prevent the chopiness of separating two ideas that are closely related and to ask the reader to make a connection between the two statements. The semicolon also shows a progression from the first statement to the second.
- It is crucial that statements which are separated by a semicolon are independent clauses. A good way to make sure that your use of the semicolon is correct is to separate the statements on either side of the semicolon and put a period between the two instead. Once you are certain that each statement can function alone as a sentence, you can join them.

2. **To separate items in a list which contain internal punctuation.**

*Example:* The Millennium Events Committee has planned several exciting events for spring semester, including lectures by Nikki Giovanni, an African-American poet and human rights activist; Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister of Pakistan; and Sir John Polkinghorne, who will address the topic of science and religion.

- Internal punctuation separates the guests' names from their descriptions. Therefore, the author has used semicolons.
- If none of the items in the list includes internal punctuation, then a comma should be used.

**Here are some sentences in which a semicolon is used effectively:**

The physical differences between Jude and the university students are symbolic of more than just their differing social positions; they are emblems of Jude's ignorance and the impossibility of his dreams.

This place of safety and sanity is not on a calm and smooth plane of molten glass; reaching it involves a leap of faith and tough confrontation with the reality of pain and death.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the real danger of going into the wilderness is not that of confronting savages or dying of disease; the thing most to be dreaded is the internal change, the possible descent into madness.

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## S NO. 3 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### The Colon

*A colon is formed with two vertical periods and has two primary functions: to introduce something or to separate elements.*

#### Introducing an explanation, example, or appositive

Use a colon before the element you are about to introduce in your sentence.

- *Example:* When quoting from a text, you must cite the information: list the author or publication where the quotation comes from followed by its page number. (The second statement gives an *explanation* of the first).
- *Example:* Kim is never on time for any of her appointments: just last week she arrived thirty minutes late to the Volunteer Council meeting. (The second statement is an *example* of the first).
- *Example:* Students at Agnes Scott abide by the Honor Code: a pledge that we will refrain from behaviors such as cheating, stealing, or plagiarizing. (The second statement provides an *appositive* for the Honor Code.)

#### Introducing a series, list or quotation

Again, use a colon before the element you are about to introduce in your sentence.

- *Example:* Since Mom is working late, she gave me a list of things to pick up at the grocery store: eggs, milk, tomatoes, and ice cream. (the second statement is a list.)
- *Example:* I remember my mother always said the same thing to me each morning as I left for school: "Be sweet and remember that Mother loves you very much." (The colon is placed before the quotation to separate it from the introductory portion of the sentence.)

#### Separating elements

Colons have several standard uses for separating elements.

- Time (hours, minutes, seconds)      9:45 P.M.      5:13:07
- Biblical Chapters and Verses      John 3:16      II Timothy 2:1a
- Titles and Subtitles      *America's Sport: A History of Baseball*

#### Common colon mistakes

- Unless it is separating elements, a colon should come only at the end of an independent clause (a phrase that could stand alone as a complete sentence).
- Colons do not follow expressions like *such as*, *especially*, or *including*. Colons should not be placed between a verb and its object or complement, unless the object is a quotation.

**Incorrect**—My favorite colors are: red, blue, and white.

**Correct**—My favorite colors are red, blue, and white.

**Incorrect**—We frequent several Decatur restaurants such as: Butter and Cream and Raging Burrito

**Correct**—We frequent several Decatur restaurants, such as Butter and Cream and Raging Burrito

**Incorrect**—When John saw his new car, he said: "I can't believe it's actually mine!"

**Correct**—When John saw his car, he said, "I can't believe it's actually mine!"

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## S NO. 4 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### The Comma

*Comma rules vary greatly depending on the style used, English versus American usage, and other considerations. Here are some general comma rules that apply for a majority of cases. If you're not sure, check the St. Martin's Handbook or the recommended style guide.*

#### **Use a comma after introductory elements.**

Make sure you use a comma after an introductory word, expression, phrase, or clause.

*Example:* Carefully, the chef added a final touch to his masterful dessert.

*Example:* To avoid answering the teacher's question, I sunk into my chair.

#### **Use a comma in compound sentences.**

Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, so, or yet) when it joins two independent clauses (two thoughts that can be complete sentences on their own).

*Example:* The rain began to pound rapidly, and the thunder grew more frequent.

#### **Use commas to set off nonessential elements.**

If the phrase can be taken out of the sentence so that the sentence makes sense without it, set the phrase off with commas.

*Example:* The miners, who went on strike, gained the support of local newspapers.

#### **Use commas to separate items in a series.**

A comma is used in between items in a series of three or more words, phrases, or clauses. You may often see a series with no comma after the next-to-the-last item; however, occasionally omitting that comma can cause confusion, and you will never be wrong if you include it.

*Example:* My favorite foods are pizza, chocolate, and ice cream.

#### **Use commas to set off appositives.**

When an appositive (noun or noun substitute that renames a nearby noun or noun substitute) is not essential to identify what it renames, it is set off with commas.

*Example:* Mrs. Sanders, my childhood piano teacher, taught me to love music.

#### **Use commas to set off contrasting elements.**

Use a comma (or commas) to set off a modifying element that ends or interrupts a sentence if the modifier establishes a contrast.

*Example:* The government chose Texas, not Massachusetts, as the site for the project.

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### The Comma

#### Use commas with adverbial clauses or with *that* and *which* clauses.

Adverbial clauses (*when, where, because, although, before*) are usually essential to the meaning of the sentence, so they do not need to be set off with commas unless the adverbial clause comes before an independent clause or begins with *although, even though, while*, or another conjunction expressing the idea of contrast.

*Example:* Betty sat in the same chair *when she went to the library.*

*Example:* *When Betty went to the library,* she always sat in the same chair.

*Example:* Betty always sat in the same chair at the library, *even though the chair was at the back.*

*That* is always essential and is NOT set off with commas.

*Which* can be either essential or nonessential, so the comma rule will depend on the sentence.

#### Use a comma with quotations.

Use commas to set off a quotation from words used to introduce or identify its source. A comma at the end of a quoted word, phrase, or sentence goes *inside* the closing quotation mark.

*Example:* After the play ended, *Kelly commented,* "I really enjoyed watching my friends on stage."

#### Use commas to set off parenthetical and transitional expressions.

Because parenthetical and transitional expressions (any added comments or information) often interrupt or digress, they are usually set off with commas.

*Example:* My dad, *of all people,* told me not to take school so seriously.

#### Use commas with dates, addresses, titles, and numbers.

**Dates.** Use a comma between the day of the week and the month, between the day of the month and the year, and between the year and the rest of the sentence.

*Example:* On May 12, 2001, Agnes Scott College held graduation exercises.

**Addresses and place names.** In addresses and place names, use a comma after each part, including the state if no ZIP code is given. A ZIP code is not preceded by a comma.

*Example:* Agnes Scott College is located at 141 East College Avenue, Decatur, Georgia.

**Titles.** Use commas to set off a title such as *M.D., Ph.D.,* and so on, but not with *Jr.* and *Sr.*

*Example:* I sent a letter of recommendation to Jane Doe, M.D.

**Numbers.** In numbers of five or more digits, use a comma between each group of 3 digits, starting from the right.

*Example:* Currently, the world population is over 7,000,000,000.

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## S NO. 5 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### Subject-Verb Agreement

*The subject of a sentence and its verb must always agree in number (one, two) and person (first, second, third). A lack of agreement can drastically change the meaning of your sentence. Keeping your subjects and verbs in agreement can be as easy as identifying your subject wherever it is located, or as tricky as remembering a few rules.*

#### **The importance of being in agreement:**

*Kissing monkeys are entertaining. vs. Kissing monkeys is entertaining.*

The only difference is in the verb, but the meaning of each sentence is very different.

#### **Finding the subject of your sentence.**

Ask: Who or what is performing the action? What noun/clause/subject is essential to the basic meaning of the sentence? Is it singular or plural? Is it first, second, or third person?

*Example: Dogs eat cats.* Who or what carries out the action of the verb “eat?” Dogs!

“Dogs” is the subject.

#### **Checking the verb for agreement in number and person.**

Now determine how the verb should be shaped to match the subject. Don’t be fooled by words that come between the subject and verb, such as appositives, prepositions, clauses and other phrases.

*Example: She and I go to the park every Sunday.* “She and I” is the subject. There’s more than one person going, and one of those is the speaker, so the subject is first person plural.

*Example: The secretary, together with the treasurer, demands a revote.* Since the subject is secretary, the verb should be singular third-person= (she) demands. The treasurer is only an aside, not a subject.

*Example: Under the table are twenty balloons.* The subject is “balloons,” so the verb must be plural, even though the nearest word, which can be mistaken for the subject, is singular — “table.”

#### **Verbs and subjects to watch out for:**

- Antecedents: “One of the” and “who, which, that” are a deadly combination. The verb form often will depend on the meaning of the sentence, and who “who/which/that” really refers to.
  - *Example: Carla is one of the employees who always work overtime.*  
Meaning: There are many employees who work overtime. Carla is one of them. Who is doing the action in this phrase? The employees. That is who “who” is referring to. That is why the verb should be plural third person — “work” and NOT “works.”
  - *Example: Sam is the only one of the employees who always works overtime.*  
Meaning: There are many employees. Only Sam works overtime. Who is doing the action? In this meaning, Sam is. This “who” is referring to him. He is the one working overtime. That is why the verb should be singular third person — “works” and NOT “work.”

(continued on reverse)

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## S NO. 5 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### Subject Verb Agreement, Continued

- **Linking Verbs:** They should agree with the subject, not the complement.  
*Example: Katie's joy is fudge bars.* "Joy" is the subject and "bars" is the complement. Why? Mostly because of the order of the sentence. Linking verbs are unique in this way, because they do not represent an action. Look at what happens if the order of the nouns is reversed.  
*Example: Fudge bars are Katie's joy.* Now, the subject is "bars" and the complement is "joy."
- **Hidden plurals:** Some words are disguised plurals; others are masquerading singulars.
  - *Example: Politics is despicable. (NOT: Politics are despicable.)*

#### Grammar rules to watch out for:

- **Compound subjects:** Sometimes, the number of the subject is hard to determine.
  - *Example: My mom and my dog like to play Frisbee.* Two separate subjects = plural subject.
  - *Example: My pet and best friend is my dog.* Two subjects, actually the same person or thing = single subject.
  - *Example: Each elephant gets a ton of peanuts a day.* "Each" and "every" indicate a single verb form.
  - *Example: Neither the parakeet nor the mice know what happened. OR Neither the mice nor the parakeet knows what happened.* With "neither...nor," "either...or," and just "or," the verb agrees with the closest subject.
- **Collective nouns:** Some nouns include a group of people (like the word "group"). These subjects can be singular or plural depending on meaning. Are you talking about the group as a unit (singular) or as individuals (plural)? When in doubt, choose singular.
  - *Example: The faculty decides on courses for the next year.* The faculty act as one.
  - *Example: The faculty disagree on which courses to offer next year.* The faculty are acting as individuals.
- **Indefinite-pronoun subjects:**
  - These subjects ("somebody," "another," "any," "either," etc.) are usually singular.
    - *Example: Nobody knows the rate of pizza consumption.*
  - "Both," "few," "many," "others" and "several" are plural.
    - *Example: Few of the teachers know the rate of pizza consumption.*
  - "All," "any," "enough," "more," "most," "none," "part," and "some" can be either, depending on the reference:
    - *Example: Some of the students know the rate of pizza consumption.* Many students = plural verb.
    - *Example: Some of the pizza was consumed.* One hunk o' pizza = singular verb.
  - Gerund phrases, titles of works, company names, and words as words: These groups are all singular.
    - *Example: Walking to the store in this heat is tragic, but The Grapes of Wrath is more tragic.*

As you can see, the meaning of the sentence is the primary guide. Taking out everything that is not essential to the sentence and moving clauses around can help clarify who is doing what. Finally, don't rely on computer grammar checks. Only you really know what your subject is.

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# Center for Writing and Speaking

## S NO. 6 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### Verb Tenses

The crux of a sentence is the action it describes, indicated by a verb. Verb tense connects the kind of action (e.g. to run) or existence (e.g. to seem) to its relationship with time (ran, run, will run, or seemed, seems, will seem, etc.). Using proper and consistent tenses strengthens a paper and makes its ideas more cohesive. Refer to both sides of this handout for tips on choosing and using verb tenses.

#### Choosing a tense.

Although no overarching rule dictates which tense to use in a particular piece of writing, some general guidelines help determine when to use which tenses.

- **Use present tense** when the world is contained between the front and back covers of a book. Because the plot of a novel or the argument of an article never changes, the author always writes, the characters always do, and the text always means something.  
Example: *Maggie appears to play the coquette at times: she manipulates the emotions of the men in her life, seemingly in rejection of the oppressive, patriarchal life they each represent.* Even though Maggie manipulates these men at different times, we read the novel as she manipulates each character. Because we see the process of these events, present tense is appropriate.  
Example: *Author Salman Rushdie explores ideas of partition and identity through Saleem's narration in *Midnight's Children*.* It's tempting to think that Rushdie explored these ideas, but each time someone opens *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie explores these themes yet again.
- **Use past tense** when historical reality is essential to the paper. History happened in the past.  
Example: *Before this federal proposal, twenty-two states had enacted laws requiring a minor seeking an abortion to either notify a parent of her intent, or to gain the consent of a parent or judge prior to having an abortion.* The historical facts surrounding the federal proposal have all already happened; the tense should indicate that they are now in the past.  
Past tense may also be appropriate if the assignment is to reflect on your own experience in relation to the book.  
Example: *Researching my genealogy was more difficult than Arno's guide led me to believe.* The writer is not simply reviewing the guide. Instead, she is reflecting on her experience with the book, which happened in the past.
- **Also use past tense** when discussing events that happened before the beginning of a work.  
Example: *When Pierce Inverarity died, he left Oedipa in charge of his estate for unclear reasons.* When *The Crying of Lot 49* opens, Pierce has already died. Because we never read about his death as it happens, it remains in past tense.
- **Use future tense** when you must make predictions, as is often necessary in a lab report, a study, or a paper pondering the events after the last page of a story.  
Example: *Future experiments will look for motor activity in homologous muscles of the pregenital abdominal segments of both sexes. These experiments have not yet taken place, so the author makes it clear that when they occur, they will have certain goals.*

(continued on reverse)

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## Feeling Comfortable with Verb Tenses, Continued

### Be consistent.

More important than remembering the “correct” tense for a particular kind of paper is remembering to use the chosen tense consistently. Even if you’re uncertain of the appropriateness of a particular tense, if you’re consistent, readers will be able to follow your train of thought.

- **With one tense**

In literature, even if one scene happens long after another, discuss both in present tense.

Example (inconsistent): *The other men thought Yossarian was crazy because he no longer wanted to wear his uniform; Yossarian, however, is perhaps the sanest member of the group.* Was Yossarian sane when the other men thought he was crazy?

The difference in tenses separates these two ideas, leaving a gap in time and therefore in information.

Example (consistent): *The other men think Yossarian is crazy because he no longer wants to wear his uniform; Yossarian, however, is perhaps the sanest member of the group.* Present tense in both sentences indicates that Yossarian is sane while the other men think he is crazy.

- **With multiple tenses**

Sometimes a paper requires reference to past or future events while discussing a subject in the present. The key to maintaining consistency in these cases is to return to one tense as the point of reference.

Example: *Written and spoken evidence supported the idea that American colonists and the citizens of Great Britain held similar views on the importance of liberty and governmental representation.* If the writer means that evidence in Colonial times supported those views, this consistent past tense is fine. If, however, evidence still supports those ideas, the verb tense should indicate that.

Example: *Written and spoken evidence supports the idea that American colonists and the citizens of Great Britain held similar views on the importance of liberty and governmental representation.* In this version, the colonists and citizens are still part of history (past tense), but the evidence discussed is relevant today (present tense).

### Check for consistency.

- With passive voice: Inverting subject and verb can be confusing. When you notice passive voice in your own work, double check that the helping verb is in the tense you intend to use.

*Example*: *Her application is/was being processed.* The meaning of the sentence depends on the tense of “to be.”

- When quoting the text: The quotation you want to use may not be in the same tense as your paper, but make sure to introduce the quotation in the tense in which you are writing.

*Example*: *These material earnings are not what she genuinely desires. The narrator ultimately claims, “Her success excited, elated, and then bored her...the poor woman herself was yawning in spirit” (503).* Even though the quotation is in the past tense, the phrase leading into it is consistent in tense with previous sentences. This logic helps for the same reason that present tense is always used to discuss literary works; the narrator claims, just as this character desires.

- When discussing the world outside the text: Reflecting on the text or discussing events that happened before the opening or will happen after the end require mixed tenses, which can be confusing. Double check that you discuss events in these categories in their appropriate time frame.