

Sentence Style and Variety

What happens when you listen to a speaker who never varies his tone or sentence length? You get bored. And what happens when speakers emphasize the wrong words? You get confused. When you revise, think about ways to vary the structure and length of your sentences so that you can properly emphasize key ideas and maintain your reader's interest. Since sentence variety helps to **clarify relationships** between ideas and to **maintain the reader's interest**, consider using non-conventional ways to express your thoughts.

The conventional sentence in English is structured with the subject first and then the verb.

Example: Puppies are cute. [*Puppies* is the subject; *are* is the verb.]

This subject-first sentence structure is perfectly suitable, but if it's the only way you structure your sentences, you'll bore your readers and miss opportunities to emphasize more important ideas.

Since first and last words are the key places for emphasis in a sentence, think about **opening your sentences** with a different part of speech, especially verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and prepositions.

- If you want to emphasize action, place a form of the **verb first**.

Example: Chasing puppies is fun.

- If you want to emphasize the nature of the action, **begin with an adverb**.

Example: Loudly barking dogs annoy me.

- If you want to emphasize a descriptive element, put the **adjective first**.

Example: Fluffy puppies feel soft.

- If you want to emphasize location or orientation, place the **preposition first**.

Example: Underneath the dog's collar you'll see a tick.

The parts of speech above will help you with variety of openings, and they'll also help you to **combine for variety of length**. There are many other ways to combine for variety of length, especially by **combining sentences**. Consider the following methods for varying the length of your sentences.

1. Vary length by combining sentences with a **subordinating conjunction** after, although, because, since, while, etc.
2. Vary length and openings by combining sentences with a relative pronoun who, whom, whoever, whomever, whose, which, that.

3. Vary length and openings by combining sentences with a **coordinating conjunction** (FANBOYS) for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.
4. Vary length and openings by combining sentences with a **semicolon + conjunctive adverb + comma** ; consequently, ; however, ; instead, ; therefore,

Exercise A: Varying Sentence Openings

Directions: In the following questions, use forms of the verb, adverbs, adjectives, and prepositional phrases at the beginning of sentences. Follow the directions to achieve variety of opening and length. Remember to avoid modifier errors and feel free to modify the wording, as needed, to create an effective sentence.

Example: I failed my midterm. I disappointed my parents, my professor, and myself. [Begin with the verb *failing* and combine the two sentences to add variety of opening and length]

Revised: Failing my midterm, I disappointed my parents, my professor, and myself.

1. He sped down the street. He lost control of his car. [Begin with the verb *speeding* (participle) and combine the two sentences to add variety of opening and length]
2. We have changed our opinion on the matter. We now believe that you are right. [Begin with the verb *changing* (participle) and combine the two sentences to add variety of opening and length]
3. I foolishly disregarded my professor's suggestions. I ended up failing the exam and the course. [Begin with the adverb *foolishly* and combine the two sentences to add variety of opening and length]
4. The thug brutally smashed the victim's skull. He was of no conscience the adverb and the two sentences to add variety of opening and length]

5. There is gum stuck underneath the desk. It is white and dry. [Begin with the prepositional phrase *underneath the desk* and combine the two sentences to add variety of opening and length]

6. An eerie old elm tree lurks in my back yard. It spooks my little brother. [Begin with the prepositional phrase *in my backyard* and combine the two sentences to add variety of opening and length]

7. The motel is dingy. It smells putrid. [Begin with the article and adjective *The dingy* and combine the two sentences to add variety of opening and length]

8. This bedroom is a filthy pigsty. The bedroom needs to be cleaned. [Begin with the article and adjective *A filthy* and combine the two sentences to add variety of opening and length]

9. He drove so slowly down the street in his hybrid vehicle. He was even passed by kids on tricycles. [Begin with the verb *Driving* and combine the two sentences to add variety of opening and length]

10. We were knock-kneed and coughing like hags. We cursed as we marched through the sludge. [Adapted from Wilfred Owen.] [Begin with the adjective *Knockkneed* and combine the two sentences to add variety of opening and length]

Exercise B: Variety via Coordinating Conjunctions

Directions: In the following questions, combine sentences with coordinating conjunctions in order to add variety of length and correctly capture the relationship between the two sentences. Choose the answer that most effectively combines the sentences.

1. In most cases, gestation occurs inside females. In the case of seahorses, males are the ones who give birth.
 - A. In most cases, gestation occurs inside females, and in the case of seahorses, males are the ones who give birth.
 - B. In most cases, gestation occurs inside females, so in the case of seahorses, males are the ones who give birth.
 - C. In most cases, gestation occurs inside females, but in the case of seahorses, males are the ones who give birth.

2. During courtship, the genitals of the male honeybee explode inside the queen. They break off inside her body.
 - A. During courtship, the genitals of the male honeybee explode inside the queen, yet they break off inside her body.
 - B. During courtship, the genitals of the male honeybee explode inside the queen, and they break off inside her body.
 - C. During courtship, the genitals of the male honeybee explode inside the queen, but they break off inside her body.

3. During courtship, male anglerfish bite into females. They must hold onto each other in order to reproduce.
 - A. During courtship, male anglerfish bite into females, for they must hold onto each other in order to reproduce.
 - B. During courtship, male anglerfish bite into females, but they must hold onto each other in order to reproduce.
 - C. During courtship, male anglerfish bite into females, nor do they hold onto each other until death.

4. Some plants have learned to mimic the pheromones of butterflies. Plants haven't learned to mimic flight.
 - A. Some plants have learned to mimic the pheromones of butterflies, yet plants haven't learned to mimic flight.
 - B. Some plants have learned to mimic the pheromones of butterflies, or plants haven't learned to mimic flight.
 - C. Some plants have learned to mimic the pheromones of butterflies because plants haven't learned to mimic flight.

5. The creature was a reptile. I knew it would have scaly skin and be warm-blooded.
 - A. The creature was a reptile, but I knew it would have scaly skin and be warm blooded.
 - B. The creature was a reptile, so I knew it would have scaly skin and be warm blooded.

- C. The creature was a reptile, yet I knew it would have scaly skin and be warm blooded.
6. The snake is likely dying. The reason may be that it has internal parasites or that you overfed it.
- A. The snake is likely dying, and the reason may be that it has internal parasites or that you overfed it.
 - B. The snake is likely dying, yet the reason may be that it has internal parasites or that you overfed it.
 - C. The snake is likely dying, but the reason may be that it has internal parasites or that you overfed it.
7. Crepuscular animals are active at dusk. I come right before sunset with my camera to photograph them.
- A. Crepuscular animals are active at dusk, for I come right before sunset with my camera to photograph them.
 - B. Crepuscular animals are active at dusk, so I come right before sunset with my camera to photograph them.
 - C. Crepuscular animals are active at dusk, nor do I come right before sunset with my camera to photograph them.
8. Some painted turtles survive harsh winters without breathing. They have developed the ability to exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide through their skin.
- A. Painted turtles survive harsh winters without breathing, but they have developed the ability to exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide through their skin.
 - B. Painted turtles survive harsh winters without breathing, so they have developed the ability to exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide through their skin.
 - C. Painted turtles survive harsh winters without breathing, for they have developed the ability to exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide through their skin.
9. Hatchling Alligator Snapping turtles are cute. Hatchling Mississippi Map turtles are cuter.
- A. The Hatchling Alligator Snapping turtles are cute, and hatchling Mississippi Map turtles are cuter.
 - B. The Hatchling Alligator Snapping turtles are cute, so hatchling Mississippi Map turtles are cuter.
 - C. The Hatchling Alligator Snapping turtles are cute, but hatchling Mississippi Map turtles are cuter.

10. Researchers don't know whether the great white shark was eaten by an enormous cannibal shark, or some other massive sea creature. They do know that whatever ate the great white has an internal body temperature of seventy degrees Fahrenheit.
- A. Researchers don't know whether the great white shark was eaten by an enormous cannibal shark, or some other massive sea creature, and they do know that whatever ate the great white has an internal body temperature of seventy degrees Fahrenheit.
 - B. Researchers don't know whether the great white shark was eaten by an enormous cannibal shark, or some other massive sea creature, but they do know that whatever ate the great white has an internal body temperature of seventy degrees Fahrenheit.
 - C. Researchers don't know whether the great white shark was eaten by an enormous cannibal shark, or some other massive sea creature, for they do know that whatever ate the great white has an internal body temperature of seventy degrees Fahrenheit.

Exercise C: Variety via Subordinating Conjunctions Directions: Combine the sentences by choosing from the word bank a subordinating conjunction that correctly expresses the relationship between the two sentences. Feel free to modify the wording as needed in order to create an effective sentence.

Example: You didn't come to Sunday dinner. Mom was disappointed.

Revised: Because you didn't come to Sunday dinner, Mom was disappointed.

Common Subordinating Conjunctions

after	although	in order	now	that	though	unless
as	because	that	once	when	whereas	
before	even	rather	than	while		
though		since	so	that		
if		than				

1. I sprinted the entire way home. I passed out from exhaustion.

2. Kitty Genovese pleaded for help. Some bystanders did nothing to help her.

3. Our pitcher gave up only one earned run. We still lost the game.

4. You didn't show any gratitude. They think you're rude.

5. Rick began racing competitively five years ago. He has won several medals.

6. My mother cleans the dishes. I wipe the countertops.

7. We ate dinner. Then we had dessert.

8. You are funny and rich. I don't want to marry you.

9. My mother and father never saved a cent. They never had money for emergencies.

10. I love you very much. I don't love the way your breath smells at this moment.

Exercise D Variety via Conjunctive Adverbs:

Directions: Combine the sentences by choosing a conjunctive adverb that correctly expresses the relationship between the two sentences.

Example: I didn't study very much or attend class. I failed.

Revised: I didn't study very much or attend class; consequently, I failed.

In these exercises, use only the following conjunctive adverbs: *consequently, however, instead, therefore*

1. I should have stayed up late and finished my paper. I watched Monday night football, gorged on hot wings, and procrastinated on my Calculus homework.
2. You lied, you cheated, and you never said you're sorry. You no longer have a girlfriend.
3. On Thursdays, I usually study before going to the gym. Today, I went to Friendly's and skipped the gym.
4. For a year, I put ten dollars per paycheck into my savings. I still don't have enough money for hair transplants.
5. Jennifer showed up for class, submitted her work on time, and asked for help. She earned an A.
6. Richard attended every lecture, completed his work on time, and asked for help. He earned only a C+.
7. Although he is friendly, Dr. Jones is an incompetent professor. His students don't learn much from him.
8. Superintendents are highly paid and wield a lot of power. They must show personal and financial restraint.

9. Most students buy their textbooks online. I buy them directly from the bookstore.

10. If you come too close, you may get burned. If you stay too far away, you may not be warmed by the heat.

Exercise D: Variety via Relative Pronouns

Directions: Combine the sentences by using the relative pronoun requested in brackets. Feel free to modify the wording as needed in order to achieve sentence variety.

Example: The novel was interesting. I read it in one day. [Combine using *that*]

Revised: The novel was so interesting that I read it in one day.

1. The store sells everything you need. It is not far from here. [Combine using *which*]

2. The writer didn't revise for grammar. He usually proofreads carefully. [Combine using *who*]

3. Citi Field has a capacity of forty-five thousand people. It opened in 2009. [Combine using *which*]

4. The man perished in a fire. His son is a fireman. [Combine using *whose*]

5. Jennifer was exhausted and ill. She showed up anyway, and performed beautifully. [Combine using *who*]

6. Michael is a versatile musician. His mother was a talented guitarist. [Combine using *whose*]

7. I bought her a puppy. She is the woman I love. [Combine using *whom*]

8. I can't find the book. You lent it to me yesterday. [Combine using *that*]

9. We waited more than an hour for the advisor. He was stuck in traffic on the Long Island Expressway. [Combine using *who*]

10. Last summer we vacationed in Nice. Nice is located in southern France on the Mediterranean Sea. [Combine using *which*]