

# VARYING SENTENCE STRUCTURE

*Sentence structure* refers to the physical nature of a sentence and how the elements of that sentence are presented. Just like word choice, writers should strive to vary their sentence structure to create rhythmic prose and keep their reader interested. Sentences that require a variation often repeat subjects, lengths, or types.

## Varying Subject or Word Choice

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One of the easiest ways to spot text that requires variety is by noting how each sentence opens. Writers can often overuse the same word, like an author's name, or a subject, like pronouns to refer to an author, when beginning sentences. This lack of subject variety can be distracting to a reader. Review the following paragraph's sentence variety:

My philosophy of education is derived from my personal experiences. I have been an educator for 4 years, and I have learned a lot from more experienced teachers in my district. I also work mainly with students from a low socioeconomic background; my background was quite different. I will discuss how all of these elements, along with scholarly texts, have impacted my educational philosophy.

Notice how the writer of this paragraph starts each sentence and clause with a personal pronoun. Although the writer does alternate between "I" and "my", both pronouns refer to the same subject. This repetition of personal pronouns is most common when writing a Personal Development Plan (PDP) or other personal papers. To avoid this type of repetition, try adjusting the placement of prepositional phrases or dependent clauses so the subject does not open each sentence:

My philosophy of education is derived from my personal experiences. Having been an educator for 4 years, I have learned a lot from more experienced teachers in my district. I also work mainly with students from a low socioeconomic background that is quite different from mine. In this paper, I will discuss how all of these elements, along with scholarly texts, have impacted my educational philosophy.

## Varying Sentence Length

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Another way to spot needed sentence variety is through the length of each sentence. Repeating longer sentences can inundate a reader and overshadow arguments, while frequently relying on shorter sentences can make an argument feel rushed or stunted.

### Overusing Long Sentences

The company reported that yearly profit growth, which had steadily increased by more than 7% since 1989, had stabilized in 2009 with a 0% comp, and in 2010, the year they launched the OWN project, actually decreased from the previous year by 2%. This announcement stunned Wall Street analysts, but with the overall decrease in similar company profit growth worldwide, as reported by Author (Year) in his article detailing the company's history, the company's announcement aligns with industry trends and future industry predictions.

Notice how this paragraph is comprised of just two sentences. While each clause does provide relevant information, the reader may have difficulty identifying the subject and purpose of the whole paragraph.

### Overusing Short Sentences

In 2010, the company's yearly profit growth decreased from the previous year by 2%. This was the year they launched the OWN project. The profit growth had steadily increased by more than 7% since 1989. (They stabilized in 2009.) This announcement stunned Wall Street analysts. However, it aligns with the decrease in similar company profit growth worldwide. It also supports future predictions for the industry (Author, Year).

Notice how this paragraph uses the same information as the previous one but breaks it into seven sentences. While the information is more digestible through these shorter sentences, the reader may not know what information is the most pertinent to the paragraph's purpose.

### Alternating Sentence Length

Alternating between lengths allows writers to use sentences strategically, emphasizing important points through short sentences and telling stories with longer ones:

The company reported that profit growth stabilized in 2009, though it had steadily increased by more than 7% since 1989. In 2010, the year they launched the OWN project, company profit growth decreased from the previous year. This announcement stunned Wall Street analysts. According to Author (Year), however, this decrease was an example of a trend across similar company profit growth worldwide; it also supports future predictions for the industry.

### Varying Sentence Type

One of the trickiest patterns to spot is that of repetitive sentence type. Just like subject and length, overusing a sentence type can hinder a reader's engagement with a text. There are four types of sentences: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. Each sentence is defined by the use of independent and dependent clauses, conjunctions, and subordinators.

- **Simple sentences:** A simple sentence is an independent clause with no conjunction or dependent clause.
- **Compound sentences:** A compound sentence is two independent clauses joined by a conjunction (e.g., and, but, or, for, nor, yet, so).
- **Complex sentences:** A complex sentence contains one independent clause and at least one dependent clause. The clauses in a complex sentence are combined with conjunctions and subordinators, terms that help the dependent clauses relate to the independent clause. Subordinators can refer to the subject (who, which), the sequence/time (since, while), or the causal elements (because, if) of the independent clause.
- **Compound-complex sentences:** A compound-complex sentence contains multiple independent clauses and at least one dependent clause. These sentences will contain both conjunctions and subordinators.

Understanding sentence type will help writers note areas that should be varied through the use of clauses, conjunctions, and subordinators.

In her article, Author (Year) noted that the participants did not see a change in symptoms after the treatment. Even during the treatment, Author observed no change in the statements from the participants regarding their symptoms. Based on these findings, I will not use this article for my final project. Because my project will rely on articles that note symptom improvement, Author's work is not applicable.

Notice how the writer relies solely on complex sentences in this paragraph, even placing dependent clauses at the beginning of each sentence. Here is an example of merely adjusting the placement of these dependent clauses but not the sentence type:

In her article, Author (Year) noted that the participants did not see a change in symptoms after the treatment. Author observed, even during treatment, no change in the statements from the participants regarding their symptoms. I will not use this article for my final project based on these findings. Because my project will rely on articles that note symptom improvement, Author's work is not applicable.

While this change in the placement of dependent clauses does avoid a repetitive rhythm to the paragraph, try combining sentences or using conjunctions to create compound or compound-complex sentences to vary sentence type:

In her article, Author (Year) noted that the participants did not see a change in symptoms after the treatment. Author observed, even during treatment, no change in the statements from the participants regarding their symptoms, and based on these findings, I will not use this article for my final project. Because my project will rely on articles that note symptom improvement, Author's work is not applicable.

Making these slight adjustments to sentence type helps the reader engage with the narrative rather than focus on the structure of the text. Adjusting your sentence type during a final revision is a great way to create effective prose for any scholarly document.