

Sentence Patterns

From Simple to Complex

The prompt to read this information appears on pp. 23 and 25 of *Acting on Words*.

Note: The following nine sentence examples offer an introduction to sentence analysis. For more detailed help with this important part of active reading, see “Preparing to Solve the 15 Common Errors” on this text website in the Handbook section.

Nine Examples

1. *She saved my brother’s life.*

This is a **simple declarative** structure moving from the subject *she* to the verb *saved* to the direct object *life*. Illustrated here is basic English structure: from subject to verb to object (or subject complement or modifying phrase). See the Handbook Section 1 “Subjects,” “Verbs,” and “Objects.” The above example comes from “Brownie,” Reader, p. 375.

2. *It happened during cucumber-picking season when I was four years old.*

This sentence from “Brownie” is **complex**; that is, it includes a main or independent clause [It happened during cucumber-picking season] and a subordinate or dependent clause [see the Handbook Section 1, “Clauses”].

3. *It was the dry season, six months or so since the last rain, and the dirt road was blanketed with four or five inches of chalky dust.*

This sentence, also from “Brownie,” is **compound**; that is, it contains two main or independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction. Note that a comma is used before the conjunction *and* to indicate transition to a second main clause (common correction 8 E, see Handbook Section 3).

4. *Go to the store.*

This style of sentence is **imperative**: it commands the listener to do something. In this case, the subject *you* is understood or elliptical: [You] go to the store.

5. *Are you going to the store?*

Questions, **interrogative** sentences, often place the subject between the auxiliary and the participle. *You* is the subject; *are going* is the predicate consisting of the present participle *going* and the auxiliary *are*. See the Handbook Section 1, “Predicates.” Some analysts would group the modifying phrase “to the store” as part of the predicate (words connected to the verb, the action or state of being).

6. *The traditional idea of seeking and teaching truth the university today has half-forgotten.*

In this **inverted** word order, the writer proceeds from object [*idea*] to subject [*university*] to predicate [*has half-forgotten*].

7. *The traditional idea of seeking and teaching truth is half-forgotten today by the university.*

This **passive voice** structure follows the normal subject-to-verb pattern while converting the actual doer of the action [*university*] into a modifying phrase (an adverbial one) within the predicate. See the Handbook Section 3, Common Error 14 Overuse of Passive Voice. See also Handbook Section 1 “Phrases,” “Modifiers,” and “Adverbs.”

8. *Half-forgotten today by the university is the traditional idea of seeking and teaching truth.*

This **passive voice** structure resembles the preceding example, but in this case the usual subject-to-verb pattern has been **inverted**. The main verb [*half-forgotten*] comes first followed by the adverbial prepositional phrase [*by the university*], then the verb [*is*], then the grammatical subject [*idea*]. (See Common Error 14, Handbook, Section 3, for more on passive voice and the advantages of using it with discretion).

9. *There are good reasons to be grateful.*

This is a fairly common structure in English, represented by sentences like “It is a lovely day.” The words “there” and “it” in this pattern are sometimes referred to as “dummy words or subjects (they are also called “expletives”),” because they are posing where the subject usually appears but do not have a clear function. In such patterns, the verb (“are” in the first example, “is” in the second) comes *before* the real subject (“reasons” in the first example, “day” in the second). The verb in such cases is a liking verb, one that joins a subject with a subject complement such as “appear” or “be.” In most cases, the verb is a form of “be.” In usual syntax, the thoughts in the previous two examples would be expressed as follows: “[t]he reasons to be grateful are good ones,” and “[t]he day is lovely.” But in these particular cases, expressing the thought in standard subject to verb word order does not sound idiomatic, or natural. In certain cases, these filler words sound normal and therefore preferable. Often, however, you can improve your essays by removing these “filler” words. For example, the following sentence could be improved. “On the subject of removing expletives, there are two reasons that are important.” Your instructor might ask why you would not simply write, “On the subject of removing expletives, two reasons are important.” Those two reasons, by the way, are that the sentence becomes more crisp and more direct.

Nevertheless, this form of sentence, like passive-voice structures, does occur naturally; it does have its uses. The wide range of sentence patterns in English means that writers can play with rich formal and rhythmical possibilities. You can have fun manipulating sentence patterns in order to achieve various effects that further your meaning. Sometimes these are best discovered by you in your writing adventures (and pointed out by your classmates and instructor), rather than adopted exclusively from a book of guidelines. Remember that even the most thorough rhetoric book is still merely a prompt to get you started.

Note: The preceding nine sentence examples offer an introduction to sentence analysis. For more detailed help with this important part of active reading, see “Preparing to Solve the 15 Common Errors” on this text website in the Handbook section.

Practice

A. Make up a paragraph in which you use at least *five* of the sentence patterns illustrated above. Consult your classmates and instructor for a second opinion of whether each of your practice sentences replicates a different form of those illustrated above.

B. Review sentences 1 – 8 above and find one example of a “dummy” or “expletive” subject. For that example, do some rephrasing so that the true subject appears in its traditional opening position. See the end of this document for the answer.

Sentence Variation Patterns

Following are four common patterns of sentence variation within paragraphs. Of course, many other patterns are possible.

Similar

Here is the first paragraph of “The Hockey Sweater,” Reader, p. 387:

<PARA>The winters of my childhood were long, long seasons. We lived in three places—the school, the church and the skating-rink—but our real life was on the skating-rink. Real battles were won on the skating-rink. Real strength appeared on the skating-rink. The real leaders showed themselves on the skating-rink. School was a sort of punishment. Parents always want to punish children and school is their most natural way of punishing us. However, school was also a quiet place where we could prepare for the next hockey game, lay out our next strategies. As for church, we found there the tranquility of God: there we forgot school and dreamed about the next hockey game. Through our daydreams it might happen that we would recite a prayer: we would ask God to help us play as well as Maurice Richard.</PARA>

Notice that Roch Carrier uses similar declarative sentences throughout this paragraph in a way that evokes the thoughts of a boy and that introduces the idea of conformity. He ends four consecutive sentences with “skating rink,” the crucial setting. Unless used with care, however, too many similar sentences, and especially simple sentences, can create monotony and the effect of thoughtlessness or juvenile thinking.

Alternating

Here are the first three sentences of paragraph 2 of “Brownie,” Reader, p . 375:

One day I saw Brownie do something that shaped my view of animals forever.
She saved my brother’s life. It happened during cucumber-picking season
when I was four years old.

This example of alternating sentence style shows the power gained by a simple sentence [*She saved my brother’s life*] when it is framed on either side by complex sentences. As

the term suggests, this pattern *alternates* from one sentence type to another and then back to the first.

Progressive

The following paragraph comes from a Mordecai Richler short story “The Summer My Grandmother Was Supposed to Die”:

<PARA>A nurse came every day from the Royal Victorian Order. She arrived punctually at noon and at five to twelve I’d join the rest of the boys under the outside staircase to peek up her dress as she climbed to our second-storey flat. Miss Bailey favoured absolutely beguiling pink panties, edged with lace, and that was better than waiting under the stairs for Cousin Bessie, for instance, who wore enormous cotton bloomers, rain or shine.</PARA>

Notice how the sentences become increasingly longer as they build to a climax (prurient pun intended), reflecting erotic intensification in the narrator’s recollection of a voyeuristic indulgence. Progressive patterns can build from short and simple to long and complex or vice versa.

Symmetrical

Here is the opening paragraph of “A Story to Pass On,” an essay by writing Professor Daphne Read. It begins with an epigraph taken from the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison:

<QUO>It was not a story to pass on

<SRC>—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*</SRC></QUO><H1>

</H1>

<PARA>This, too, is not a story to pass on: In Edmonton, Alberta, on November 28, 1993, Joyce Cardinal was doused with gasoline and set on

fire by an unknown assailant. She died about three weeks later on December 20, 1993, in the University of Alberta Hospital. This story haunted a student who was an emergency nurse on duty when Joyce Cardinal was brought to the hospital. Through several writing courses over two years, this student tried to put the story into words; she wanted to give voice to the woman, to express solidarity with other victims of violence, to express the anguish and horror, and to find a way through it to . . . *what?* It was a story that could not be told.</PARA>

The opening sentence, from a rhythmical standpoint, may as well end at the colon (see Handbook Section 2 and Section 3, Common Error 9). Taking that breaking point as the first rhythmic unit of the paragraph, we find close similarities between the lengths and styles of the opening and closing elements of the paragraph. Each, in turn, echoes the terse epigraph from Toni Morrison. Both sentences are short and simple: the paragraph attains meaningful symmetry by opening and closing with the same pattern.

Seven-sentence Exercise: Symmetrical Pattern

In perfectly symmetrical paragraphs, the second half of the paragraph represents an exact mirror image in sentence styles of the first half. For example, a symmetrical paragraph of seven sentences might use the following pattern:

1. simple
2. complex
3. passive voice
4. interrogative
5. passive voice
6. complex
7. simple

This may strike you as a rather artificial, overly crafted structure. However, many writers find that when they when they allow an intuitive part of their being to take over, their finished work will present a remarkably symmetrical or otherwise highly crafted pattern in full service to intended meaning. Here is an illustration of the above pattern, and you may agree that despite its symmetrical pattern, the tone is more intuitive and spontaneous than formal.

I want to achieve the above seven-sentence pattern. It probably won't be easy, because I have never before tried consciously to shape a paragraph according to sentence styles. No doubt an amusing time is going to be had. But will it be amusing for me or simply for those reading the comical effects? Either way, an amusing time is to be had. When I get to the end, I wonder if I will be able to recognize what I have done. Hey, I'm there!

Notice that the writer has exercised some variation and additional repetition without ignoring the basic grammatical patterns requested. For instance, he has opened with a simple sentence that is declaratory (simply states a fact or opinion) but has ended with a simple sentence that is exclamatory (indicates surprise or other strong emotion). His first complex sentence begins with the independent clause whereas the second one ends with the independent clause. For the passive voice units he has repeated the same thought twice, with the intervening active voice sentence representing interrogative mood (asking a question), so that the repeated thought indicates a central tension and seems to take on an extra sense the second time he expresses it (there's no stopping now). Using the passive voice to express a thought that is unpleasant (the possibility of being laughed at, of feeling unsuccessful) may help to justify the presence of so much passive voice: we normally say unpleasant things indirectly, using language to distance ourselves from the implications. This use of passive voice and repetition may also contribute to an effect of freewriting ... an effect that may demonstrate how spontaneous and unaffected a symmetrical pattern can actually sound.

Remember, this was just an exercise, demonstrating ways you can explore patterns and rhythms and the meanings and effects they contribute. In your actual essay writing, placing undue attention on formal patterns could compromise the clarity and precision of what you wish to say—in which case, give priority to precision and clarity. It would generally not be advisable to use two passive voice sentences in one paragraph of scholarly writing, or even one such sentence if a passive voice alternative would work. We include the two passive voice sentences in the above exercise partly to help you to recognize this form and partly to offset the oversimplistic guideline “never use the passive voice.” A better guideline is that before prohibiting an element of the language, we should think very hard about the losses that could result. As in essays of argumentation, in the acceptance of language rules, critical thinking and moderation are always important allies.

Use Sentence Patterns for Emphasis and Tone

Your paragraphs should use sentence variation in purposeful ways, to highlight keywords and to contribute meaningful rhythmic effects. Your sentences should help to shape your meaning and tone. For example, if you fall into a pattern of repeated compound sentences (I was dragged to the meeting, and I listened to the speaker for fifteen minutes), you will lose the opportunity to subordinate certain ideas, an opportunity provided by complex sentences using subordination (After I was dragged to the meeting, I ignored the speaker for a full fifteen minutes). Falling into a repetitious sentence structure often means flying on “auto-pilot,” pulled along by nothing more than one limited pattern or another. Your sentences will then prevent you from expressing the relationships of thoughts as precisely as you should, and an effect of monotony will occur. As part of the revision process, be sure to examine your sentences and use their patterns and rhythms to the full potential offered by English syntax. Remember that English provides an abundance of sentence lengths and patterns. By combining these in different ways, you can create various rhythmical effects to complement the meaning and purpose of your writing.

Answer to Practice B

The use of a dummy subject occurs in the first clause of sentence example 3: “*It was the dry season.*”

To express this thought using subject to verb order, you might say, “The dry season was upon us,” or something to that effect beginning with the subject “the dry season.” Note that the second independent clause in example 3 uses standard subject to verb syntax.

You may have considered choosing the following wording from sentence 2: “*It happened during cucumber-picking season.*”

In this case, however, the pronoun “it” stands for “this event” or “this action,” as signaled by the previous sentence, “*She saved my brother’s life.*” This use of the pronoun might be considered loose and informal since it does not have an explicit grammatical equivalent in the previous sentence, a noun, such as “deed” or “action.” But the style of writing is informal, and traditionally, when we hear the expression “it happened,” we know that “it” stands for “the story I am about to tell.” Furthermore, the pronoun in the example “[i]t happened during cucumber-picking season” is not followed by a linking verb (usually a form of “to be”).