

Sentence Variety

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Sentence variety begins with understanding the definition of a sentence. A **sentence** is a string of words that contain both a *subject* and a *verb* and express a *complete idea*. Sometimes it also contains *modifiers*, a noun or adjective that restricts or adds to the main noun. For example, a *very big dog*. In this phrase, *very* and *big* modify *dog*. **Sentence structure** refers to how the elements of a sentence are presented. When writing a paper, it is easy to draft sentences that are similar in structure. Because failing to vary sentence structure can contribute to a repetitive sound, **sentence variety** incorporates the use of various sentence patterns, lengths, and openings.

Sentence Patterns: In English, sentences are made up of *independent* and *dependent clauses*.

Independent clauses (IC) can stand alone because they incorporate three things: a subject, a verb, and a complete thought.

(Independent Clause): *Kelly sings beautifully each morning.*

Dependent clauses (DC) also contain a subject and verb; however, they cannot stand alone because they depend on an independent clause to completely express an idea. Dependent clauses are also marked by *dependent marker words*. When these words are added to the beginning of an independent clause, a dependent clause is created. **BE CAREFUL:** When dependent clauses are punctuated incorrectly, they often create sentence fragments.

(Dependent Clause): *When Marvin wakes up...*

Here is a list of the most common dependent marker words: after, although, as, as if, because, before, even if, even though, if, in order to, since, though, unless, until, whatever, when, whenever, whether, and while.

* List adapted from Purdue Owl Online Writing Lab. For more information see: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl>

There are four main sentence patterns in English that incorporate a combination of these two types of clauses.

1. **Simple:** The simplest English sentence pattern only contains one independent clause.

(Subject + Verb): He writes.
(Subject, Verb + Modifiers): Before class, he writes carefully.
(Subject, Verb + Object): He writes the thesis statement.

Sometimes, subjects and verbs can be a little tricky when there is more than one subject or verb. These become what are known as compound subjects or compound verbs. It is important to note that these special subjects and verbs still belong to the simple sentence pattern, because they only express one main idea.

(Compound Subject + Verb): Mary and John write.
(Subject + Compound Verb): He writes and reads.

2. **Compound:** The compound sentence pattern is made up of two or more independent clauses. These clauses can be combined with a conjunction word or a transition word. The most common conjunctions make up the mnemonic [comma + FANBOYS] which stands for [For/And/Nor/But/Or/Yet/So]. For transition words, see our Transitions Words and Phrases Handout.

(IC, [FANBOYS] IC): He writes the thesis statement, and she reads the assignment.
(IC; transition word, IC): He writes the thesis statement; however, she checks his grammar.

3. **Complex:** A complex sentence contains one independent clause and at least one dependent clause.

(DC, IC): While Susan drives to the store, Clark makes the grocery list.
(IC, DC): I had to meet James because he forgot his backpack.
(DC, IC DC): Since Martha is gone, you need to return the books unless Joy can do it.

4. **Compound-Complex:** A compound-complex sentence contains multiple independent clauses and at least one dependent clause and are created using the techniques of both compound sentences as well as complex sentences.

(DC, IC, [FANBOYS] IC): As time passes, we all grow older, yet we become wiser.

(IC; transition word, IC DC): Corey has the flu; in short, he is miserable *even though* Anna feels fine.

REVISION TIP: Utilizing all of these sentence patterns in your essay will keep you from having only one kind of sentence, whether short and choppy or long and unending. If you have a hard time knowing what kind of sentence your paper needs, try reading what you have written out loud, or marking each the beginning and end of each sentence with a different colored marker. Are there sentences that are too long which you need to separate, or are there sentences too short that you need to combine?

Sentence Openings:

After incorporating the four different sentence patterns, include sentence openers to add style to your paper.

Adjective Opener: Adjectives are a part of speech that modify nouns and provide more information about them. Adjective openers often modify the subject of a sentence and are followed by a comma.

Ex: Happy and excited, Caroline jumped out of bed the morning of her graduation.

Adverb Opener: Adverbs are a part of speech that modify verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. Adverbs are easily recognizable because most end in “-ly.” Adverb openers do not have to be followed by a comma if the opener uses only one; however, if there is more than one word in the opener, it must be followed by a comma.

Ex (one adverb): Cautiously Mark backed his new car out of the car lot.

Ex (two adverbs): Cautiously and joyfully, Mark backed his new car out of the car lot.

Ex (adverb modifying adjective): Cautiously happy, Mark backed his new car out of the car lot.

Prepositional Phrase: Prepositions are words that combine with a noun or pronoun to show direction, location, and time, or introduce an object. (For a list of common prepositions, see our Prepositions Handout.) A prepositional phrase includes a preposition and must be followed by a comma.

Ex (one prepositional phrase): After the last speech, everyone gave a standing ovation.

Ex (two prepositional phrases): In the park by the lake, there lives a family of ducks.

Participle Phrase: A participle is based on a verb and used to express action or a state of being. In a participle phrase, it is used as an adjective and often ends in -ing or -ed. Since they function as adjectives, participles modify nouns or pronouns. As an opener, a participle phrase must be followed by a comma and by the noun doing the action. To make sure you have the right noun following your participle phrase ask yourself “Who was...?” followed by the participle phrase. The answer to that question is the noun that should directly follow the phrase.

Ex (present participle, “-ing”): Walking back and forth, the lawyer urged the jury to vote guilty.

INCORRECT: Walking back and forth, the jury was urged by the lawyer to vote guilty.

(Who was walking back and forth? The lawyer was walking back and forth.)

Ex (past participle, “-ed”): Convinced of her innocence, the jury voted to set the prisoner free.

INCORRECT: Convinced of her innocence, the prisoner was set free by the jury.

(Who was convinced of her innocence? The jury was convinced of her innocence.)

Works Consulted:

Purdue University Online Writing Lab (owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/); UNC-Chapel Hill Writing Center (writingcenter.unc.edu/);
Writing Matters: A Handbook for Writing and Research, 2nd ed. (Howard)