

Sentence Variety and Rhythm

As writers, we have the ability to lead readers through our writing by controlling our text. One of the primary methods of directing the reader is through rhythm, which is created by sentence variety.

Rhythm

Rhythm is how writing sounds and how sentences and ideas are connected. Monotonous writing is the absence of rhythm, as shown in the example below.

“This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It’s like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety” (Provost).

Rhythm is what engages the reader and encourages them to keep reading. Rhythm paces the reader, emphasizes points and ideas, and creates mood. Most importantly, it makes writing easier to access and understand. By becoming aware of rhythm and its impact on the reader, writers can control their writing to become more readable and best emphasize the points they want to make. In the example below, see how the same author as above adds rhythm to his writing.

“Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage them with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals—sounds that say listen to this, it is important” (Provost).

Sentence Variety

Sentence variety creates rhythm. Having the same length and/or type of sentences repeatedly creates monotony and makes the writing difficult for the reader to get through. Conversely, variety engages the reader. It captures the eye and makes text easier to read. Variety can be created by sentence length, sentence complexity, and intentional punctuation choices.

Length

Longer sentences offer more information, letting the reader digest and meander through the thought process. Short sentences build excitement. Sentences are snappier. They sound more direct. Information is concise and clear. Short sentences and long sentences can both be effective

and are used in different contexts. Longer sentences may be preferable in novels, when you are giving vivid descriptions, or in the introduction of a paper, when you are thoroughly investigating a fact or idea. Shorter sentences may be preferable at the end of a long paragraph to succinctly summarize the main idea. Additionally, consider the genre of your writing. A reader will not want to “meander through the thought process” in a technical document, so clear and concise sentences containing only salient information will be preferable. However, using too many short sentences may imply that you lack the ability to craft lengthier sentences. It is best to keep a good balance that fits the genre of what you are writing and matches the purpose of why you are writing it. There is no set standard beyond aiming for variety.

Complexity

The English language consists of four sentence types. Use combinations of **simple**, **compound**, **complex**, and **compound-complex sentences** to add variety and make text clearer and easier to read. A simple sentence contains only one independent clause. A compound sentence contains two or more independent clauses. A complex sentence has at least one independent and one dependent clause. Lastly, a compound-complex sentence consists of at least one dependent clause and at least two independent clauses. Refer to the box below for examples.

<i>Simple</i>	She loves cooking.
<i>Compound</i>	Her roommates don't know how to cook, so she cooks for them.
<i>Complex</i>	They love to eat the delicious food that she makes for them.
<i>Compound-complex</i>	When her roommates are finished eating, they clean all the dishes, and she can finally take a break.

Additionally, **transitional words and phrases** can be used to vary the complexity of your writing. Transitional words may also be called linking or connecting words, and they help the reader progress from one idea to the next. Moreover, transitions create connections between sentences, usually by appearing at the start of sentences or clauses to express how they relate to the previous thought. In the model below, the transitional words/phrases are italicized.

The first experiment was successful. *However*, it was found to have many errors, so another experiment was performed. Our budget was depleted *as a result*.

Appositives, which are nouns that immediately follow and rename another noun to clarify or classify it, add extra information to a sentence and can reduce wordiness. In cases where the appositive is key to understanding the meaning of the sentence, commas are not needed. Otherwise, when a sentence can be understood *without* the appositive, surround the appositive with commas. The models below show how appositives can be used.

The pop star *Doja Cat* became famous in 2018.
Yayoi Kusama, *one of the best-selling female artists in the world*, is known for her use of polka-dot patterns.

Punctuation

Intentional punctuation choices also add variety (and complexity) to writing. There are several ways you can punctuate or combine sentences: a comma and a coordinating conjunction, a semicolon, a colon, or a period. Each one has its own purpose. Making careful punctuation choices will enhance the meaning of your writing as well as increase readability.

Using a **comma and coordinating conjunction** shows how two independent clauses are related. A **semicolon** can also be used in this way, but it indicates that the two independent clauses/ideas are more closely related. In the following examples, two clauses are joined: one with a comma and coordinating conjunction and the other with a semicolon.

Food deserts are areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, *and* they are more abundant in minority communities.

Food deserts are areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food; they are more abundant in minority communities.

In this type of situation, the choice is yours, and it is completely dependent on what kind of meaning you would like to come across. Each option has subtle differences in meaning.

If the clause “*Food deserts are areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food*” acts as a conclusion to a prior thought, and “*they are more abundant in minority communities*” is a new thought, the *semicolon* would be preferable because it shows a stronger separation between the two related ideas. Alternatively, if both clauses are acting as an introduction to a new idea you will be talking about, the *comma and coordinating conjunction* would be preferable because it connects the two clauses and emphasizes how they serve one purpose together.

A **colon** is used to introduce something—like a quote or a list of items—or to emphasize a word or phrase at the end of a sentence. Colons can also be used between independent clauses, but only when the *second* clause expands on or explains/defines the *first* clause.

Food deserts are areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food: *they* have few supermarkets, an excess of unhealthy food chains, and limited access to fresh foods.

Finally, in any case where you have joined two independent clauses and question whether the sentence is too long or if the ideas are closely related to each other, consider simply using a **period**. The period creates a full stop between your ideas.

Food deserts are areas with limited access to affordable and nutritious food. Though development of food deserts has long been attributed to poverty levels in an area, new research suggests that racial composition is also a key factor.

Activity 1: Revising Sentence Length

For number one below, change a lengthy sentence into multiple shorter sentences. For number two below, combine short sentences into one lengthier sentence. Be sure to achieve clarity with the choices you make.

1. Creeping in on the tips of her polished shoes, Goldilocks entered the bears' home, stepping past the threshold and looking around the odd cabin, which was populated with chairs, porridge bowls, and beds, all in threes, and large, medium, and small sizes.
2. Hansel and Gretel went into the forest. They were with their mother and father. Their mother and father left without them. It became nighttime. They were lost in the forest.

Answer Key for Activity 1

Sample answers are provided below. Note that answers will vary.

1. Creeping in on the tips of her polished shoes, Goldilocks stepped past the threshold of the bears' home. She looked around the odd cabin. It was populated with chairs, porridge bowls, and beds; there were three of each in large, medium, and small sizes.
2. Hansel and Gretel went into the forest with their mother and father, but their parents left without them; it became nighttime, and soon, they were lost in the forest.

Activity 2: Adjusting Complexity

The following two paragraphs each lack sentence variety; all sentences have similar length, structure, and complexity. Rewrite them with different types of sentences to create rhythm.

1. When observing the evolution of impressionist art, many may attribute its initial growth to the invention of the camera, which could capture a perfect image of the real world, leading artists to confront their art and consider what truly made it better or more unique than a photograph. This kickstarted the departure from neoclassical realism and the growth of the impressionist movement.
2. Veganism is a diet. It is comprised of everything except animal products. This may extend beyond food and into lifestyle as well. Vegans may commit to removing animal products from every aspect of their life. Some may be concerned. Vegans might not obtain all necessary nutrients. These are common concerns of any diet. Veganism does

not pose much risk for vitamin deficiency. Vegans should still consult with their doctors. Every person has their own unique health situation.

Answer Key for Activity 2

Sample answers are provided below. Note that answers will vary.

1. Many may attribute the initial growth of impressionist art to the invention of the camera, which could capture a perfect image of the real world. This led artists to confront and question their art: what made a painting better or more unique than a photograph? The answer many artists found was the individualism of their views of the world, and this kickstarted a departure from neoclassical realism to impressionism.
2. Veganism is a diet comprised of everything except animal products. Some vegans adopt it not only as a diet, but as a lifestyle; they commit to removing animal products from every aspect of their life. Some people may be concerned that vegans do not obtain all necessary nutrients, but these are common concerns of any diet. Veganism does not pose much risk for vitamin deficiency, and vegans can have full and healthy diets like anyone else. However, they should still consult with their doctors. Every person has their own unique health situation.

References

Provost, Gary. *100 Ways to Improve Your Writing: Proven Professional Techniques for Writing with Style and Power*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2019.

Penn, Jordan. *The Punctuation Guide*, www.thepunctuationguide.com/index.html.