

Unit 9

Sentence Length, Arrangement and Rhythm

Sentence Length

Sentence length depends on the complexity of the idea to be expressed. A simple statement requires only a very short sentence; a statement of a more subtle or detailed idea requires a longer sentence. Fashions in sentence-length change. In the past writers tended to use longer sentences. Authors like Shakespeare or Milton frequently used extremely long sentences compared to modern day standards. Prose writers sometimes produced sentences two or three hundred words long; and though these sentences were quite complex, they were fine sentences. The following, a summary sentence from Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*, arranged in a way that makes its component parts more discernible, is an example of an extremely long sentence:

Since, then, poetry is of all human learnings the most ancient, and of most fatherly antiquity, as from whence other learnings have taken their beginnings;

since it is so universal that no learned nation doth despise it, nor barbarous nation is without it;

since both Roman and Greek gave such divine names unto it, the one of prophesying, the other of making, and that indeed that name of making is fit for him, considering that where all other arts retain themselves within their subject, and receive, as it were, their being from it, the poet only, only bringeth his own stuff, and doth not learn a conceit out of a matter, but maketh matter for a conceit;

sinceneither his description nor end containeth any evil, the thing described cannot be evil;
since his effects be so good as to teach goodness, and delight the learners of it;
since therein (namely in moral doctrine, the chief of all knowledges) he doth not only far pass the historian, but, for instructing, is well nigh comparable to the philosopher, for moving, leaveth him behind him;
since the Holy Scripture (wherein there is no uncleanness) hath whole parts in it poetical, and that even our Savior Jesus Christ vouchsafed to use the flowers of it;
since all his kinds are not only in their united forms but in their severed dissections fully commendable;
I think, and think I think rightly, the laurel crown appointed for triumphant captains doth worthily, of all other learnings, honour the poet's triumph.

In the past century or so, the tendency in writing specifically designed for a large audience has been toward shorter, easier-to-grasp-at-one-glance sentences. The spread of literacy among the masses of people, the development of cheap books, magazines, and newspapers, and the increase in the tempo of living all combined to make the shorter sentence desirable and necessary. Since the majority of people who read had had only a few years of schooling, everything they read had to be in simple English, the vocabulary confined to everyday words and the sentences brief and uncomplicated. In time, the tendency toward simple expression spread from large-circulation magazines and newspapers into many fields of writing, so that nowadays books and periodicals designed for a relatively small, well-educated audience also are written in shorter sentences.

Moreover, the pace of living has become so much faster and the long sentence cannot be read and understood by those who are in a hurry. Reading matter must be fitted to the needs of those who only have a few free moments to read between their jobs and other duties.

What can sometimes be inferred from the length of the sentence a writer uses? In the first place, the extremely brief, uncomplicated sentence is characteristic of the child or of the mind which remains immature beyond the years of physical immaturity.

Secondly, because in a very short sentence there is only room for one unelaborated thought, it is impossible to emphasize an idea with many details. The writer or speaker who wishes to persuade an audience of average or less-than-average education will succeed best when he uses brief sentences. By the use of such brief sentences the successive ideas are hammered into one's consciousness, separately and emphatically.

Finally, the short sentence is often used for special effects. In a crime thriller, the absence of elaboration, the concentration upon a few bare, simple facts, add suspense and excitement to the narrative. Among modern novelists and short-story writers, brief sentences made up of short, common words are used to suggest the direct, uncomplicated reactions and thoughts of the characters.

In modern writing for a general audience, extremely long sentences are relatively infrequent. However, they do occur in some kinds of specialized writing: in legal writing, and in governmental correspondence, records, and other documents.

Sentence Arrangement

The exact order in which the various elements of a sentence are arranged helps determine how clearly and emphatically a writer's ideas are

communicated to his reader. Between each sentence there is a definite break in the reading function. Punctuation (period, exclamation mark, or question mark) signal the mind to pause for an instant before going on to the next sentence. The **mind** is momentarily refreshed and made ready to absorb the next idea. Since the **mind** is particularly receptive to the idea contained in the **first** few words of the next sentence, a writer should place an important idea in that initial position. The sentence which follows is in a less favorable position for important ideas, because the mind is busy with that first thought, and though it takes in the following ideas, it does not give them the same degree of attention. When the mind reaches the end of the sentence, the punctuation signals another pause. Because the last words of the sentence are not obscured by anything following, the **mind** has a chance to echo them; in other words, they “sink in.”

Thus, of the three main positions in a sentence of normal length, the end is the most desirable for the placing of the idea which the writer wishes to impress upon his reader’s **mind**. This is the principle underlying the so-called “periodic” sentence--a sentence which either wholly postpones the most important idea, or else delays its completion, until the very end. The periodic sentence is effective for three reasons:

- (1) It keeps the reader’s mind alert throughout the sentence, waiting for what is to come.
- (2) Having thus stimulated the **mind** to alertness, the technique will make the main idea, when it does **finally** appear, the more impressive.
- (3) It enables the mind, in its brief pause between sentences, to register the final words more vividly.

Compare the following sentences:

- The girl somehow suggested a Chinese princess, with her jet-black hair, her singularly high cheekbones, her slanting eyes, her hands with their long, tapered fingers.
- With her jet-black hair, her singularly high cheekbones, her slanting eyes, her hands with their long, tapered fingers, the girl somehow suggested a Chinese princess.

The first sentence covers all the details systematically and clearly and is absolutely correct. But if the writer wanted to impress his reader with the fact that the girl resembled a Chinese princess, it would have been better for him to keep that fact for the last. In the first sentence the reader is impressed by the fact that she had long, tapered fingers--which may be the least significant of all details--because it occurred at the end of the sentence. The emphasis is correct in the second sentence, which presents a series of details that merge in the mind and then are effectively summarized by the core of the sentence--the subject, verb, and object.

The following sentences which follow the same scheme are instances of the complete delaying of the principal idea.

- Staring into space, absently twirling the silver key chain attached to his belt, he realized for the first time the ambiguity of his position.
- If there is no change in his condition by tomorrow noon, and if, as I hope, I can get a reservation, I shall fly back to New York.
- With all its faults, and no level-headed **and realistic** observer can deny that there are many, the American system of government, based on the principles of democratic

representation and parliamentary legislation, marks the highest level of success that man's age-old quest for a more perfect society has yet achieved.

A second common means of maintaining reader-interest throughout the sentence is that of beginning the clause containing the main idea and then postponing its completion by inserting modifiers or other interrupting but relevant material. "The nations of the world, because another world war would result in complete and unthinkable destruction, have no alternative but to find some means of coexisting." One thing that must be kept in mind is that if the interruption between subject and predicate is too long, the intervening matter may cause the reader to completely forget the subject matter.

There are many degrees of periodicity in sentence structure, starting with the "loose sentence", which offers the main idea at the very outset, or else sandwiches it between subordinate ideas. The best writers mix sentences of all degrees of periodicity and looseness in their paragraphs, though never forgetting to put the most important ideas at the most prominent positions. At the same time they never forget that clumsy use of the loose sentence can spoil the effect they want to produce.

Any periodic sentence is built to achieve climax, the peak of interest or importance, which should come last. An especially effective kind of periodic sentence arranges several ideas in order of increasing importance, so that the one the author wishes to emphasize most of all will occur at the end.

Whatever the defects of American universities may be, they disseminate no prejudices; rear no bigots; dig up the buried ashes of no old superstitions; never interpose between the people and

their improvement; exclude no man because of his religious opinions; above all, in their whole course of study and instruction, recognize a world, and a broad one too, lying beyond the college walls.

The climatic sentence is **also** used for surprise. The sequence of subject-verb-object is so common in English that our minds adopt it as a habit pattern. ("The boy beat the dog.") Almost as if by instinct, when we read or listen, we expect the same order: subject (and modifiers), verb (and modifiers), object or **complement** (and modifiers). Therefore, when a writer wants to bring his reader to sudden attention, he unexpectedly varies his sentence sequence, from **normal** order to an inversion of the normal order: "The car sped on. [Subject-verb.] Jack's foot pressed the accelerator almost to the floor. [Subject-verb-object.] Then suddenly the foot lifted and jammed down on the brake pedal instead. [Subject-verb-object.] Looming dead ahead, its black mass lying inert directly across the concrete highway, was an overturned truck." [Surprise! Modifiers, verb-then subject.] Here the **established** pattern suddenly is broken. The author has achieved a dramatic effect by reversing his sentence order.

Sentence Rhythm

In prose, as well as in poetry, there are all degrees of stress. Substantives and verbs receive the most emphasis, modifying words (adjectives and adverbs) less, connectives (prepositions and conjunctions) least. However, if a modifier or a connective has an unusually vital role in the total idea that the sentence contains, it is stressed more than it would ordinarily be. A reader who would judge the rhythm of a passage he reads

or hears--or a writer who wants to polish the rhythm of his own prose--must first teach his ear to be sensitive.

In the first place, prose lacks something which verse possesses: namely, meter. Underlying most verse is a regular rhythmic pattern, made up of a constantly recurring combination of accented and unaccented syllables. In prose, however, there is no such pattern.

Secondly, unless it is written by an expert, an over-long sentence is usually unrhythmical. A long sentence written without any stops at all is unrhythmical; on the other hand, a sentence excessively interrupted by punctuation is no better.

Thirdly, regularity in the larger design of the sentence can often be a most attractive and effective rhetorical device. There should be balance and parallelism in a sentence.

In the past several decades many important literary experimentalists have renounced the use of rhythmic language. Some writers have deliberately abandoned punctuation and the other usual devices by which thought units are marked off. One main reason why they have done so is that many of them are trying to represent the "stream of consciousness"--the uncontrolled, vagrant, fragmentary thoughts and moods that run continuously through the human mind. These writers argue that the chaotic nature of such thoughts and moods should be suggested by a chaotic style. Another influential modern technique that attempts to mirror the actual uncontrolled sequence of thoughts is that of running ideas together without any punctuation whatsoever, to emphasize not only the fragmentariness of consciousness, but its unbroken continuity. The novelist may also wish to suggest the prevailing atmosphere of a character's mind--not so much what he thinks as how he thinks.

Thus, skillful deviations from the normal pattern of discourse are important means by which the modern novelist attains psychological

realism and depth. In these ways, a cultivated awareness of rhythm and arrangement inevitably increases the reader's pleasure, heightening an emotional experience whose other principal element is the connotative power of the words themselves.

Exercise 1 Sentence length

Decide what point the author wished to emphasize in each of the following sentences and whether he succeeded in doing so.

1. There are few more obvious, natural, apparent, plain, intelligible, literal, and downright objects on this earth than a boiled potato.

2. One of the things that the general public perpetually fails to understand about the life of a creative writer is that he is hard at work when he appears to be loafing, for sitting about and staring into space in pursuit of an idea or a good way of expressing it is just as much a part of the writing process as pecking furiously away at a typewriter, and indeed takes up much more of an author's days--and nights.

Exercise 2 Construction of well-ordered sentences

Sort and rearrange the contents of each package of raw data into clear, well-ordered sentences. The number of sentences depends on how you think the material should be organized.

1. Sitting in the back row. Brown sweater with pushed up sleeves. Plaid skirt, mainly green. Never noticed her before. Coral nail polish. Next to Judy, president of Tri-Delt. Slim legs. Jangling charm bracelet on left wrist. Biting her ball-point pen.

2. Comer of Seventh and Main. Sudden swerve. Loaded bus. Smashed' show window of **Rexall** Drug Store. Foggy morning. Oldsmobile convertible. Stop sign for traffic on Seventh. Hurt: two bus passengers, driver of car (thirty-year-old insurance man). About 8 A.M. Broken glass all over. Slick street. Nobody seriously. Missed four people waiting for bus.

3. Comment on the use of rhythm, the connotation of words, and the sentence arrangement in each of the following advertisements:

a. How many ways does a Cadillac delight a lady? Let us count them. There is its great beauty, for instance, to please her eye...its wondrous luxury and spaciousness to enhance her comfort...its incredible quiet to bring her rest...its extraordinary handling ease to assure her relaxation...its renowned safety to add to her peace of mind...its great fame to inspire her pride...and its marvelous economy to satisfy her practical judgment. Have you yet to discover the magic of Cadillac for yourself? Then you should visit your Cadillac dealer soon and spend an hour or so **in** the driver's seat. It's motordom's most convincing sixty minutes.

b. At **probably** no other **single** moment is a man proud of the car he loves as when **he's** met in it by the woman he loves.

A man who takes pride in his car and loves his spouse should take notice of the new Pontiac. Here is a car to enrich your life, **flatter** your wife.

Pontiac's lines are downright refreshing. Front, back, sides, top. They're in harmony with one another, coordinated, clean, without clash or **clutter**. The delightfully unique grille bears not the slightest resemblance to any other on the road.

On the move you're cradled in the road-hugging comfort of Wide-Track Wheels. Pontiac's wheels are five inches farther apart. Stability is increased, lean and sway appreciably reduced.

Men, if you'd like to turn up the flame of romance at your house, borrow a bright new Pontiac from one of our dealers tomorrow.

Take it home, see how she looks at it and in it. See how she loves the solid security of Wide-Track Wheels. See how she loves you for being so **intelligently** thoughtful. Of course she'll want to go back to the dealer's with you to help choose colors and fabrics. Give her this privilege. It's well worth it.