

Chapter 3

Sentence Style and Variety

Must you write complete sentences each time, every time?

Perish the thought (120).

Stephen King

Writers have many options when they compose each sentence. For typical construction in English, each sentence may appear exactly the same, with the same structure and length, which in effect can grow monotonous for readers and hence create also a wasteful redundancy in the expression. Great writers such as Dickens, Hemingway, or Stephen King used a combination of varied sentence structure, word choice, and sensory imagery to enliven their writings. This chapter introduces two key sentence styles fit for beginners to rephrase their sentence structure and shift the emphasis of the expression.

3.1 Parataxis

Like running or freight train constructions, Parataxis or paratactic style is a literary style consisting of the juxtaposition of clauses or phrases in the expression without indicating the relation of coordination or subordination between them.

Now, study the following passage from "On Being Ill" an essay by Virginia Woolf.

Example 3.1.1

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view, what precipices and lawns sprinkled

with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us by the act of sickness, how sickness how we go down into the pit of death and feel the waters of annihilation close above our heads and wake thinking to find ourselves in the presence of angels and the harpers when we have a tooth out and come the surface in the dentist's arm-chair and confuse his "Rinse the mouth-rinse the mouth" with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome us – when we think of this, as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature (Berry-Caban 3-4).

Clearly, Woolf crafts the whole passage above as a long run-on sentence. Again, in her "Mrs. Dalloway" Woolf also uses this literary technique.

Example 3.1.2

But for herself she had done nothing wrong; she had loved Septimus; she had been happy; she had had a beautiful home, and there her sister lived still, making hats (Woolf 73-74).

Note that although Parataxis generally omits connecting words, there is an exception when the connecting words are noncommittal, or when the connecting words do not express the relationship between ideas.

Consider the descriptions below, first "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" written by Mark Twain (Example 3.1.3) , and then "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll (Example 3.1.4).

Example 3.1.3

The air was full of the smell of flowers, **and** the buzzing of insects, **and** the twittering of birds, **and** there were no people, no wagons; there was no stir of life, nothing going on (421).

Example 3.1.4

Lastly, she pictured herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; **and** how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; **and** how she would gather about her other little children, **and** make their eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago; **and** how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, **and** the happy summer days (98).

Both examples are long compound sentences, and the main clauses of which are strung together **by multiple coordination**. Of course, unlike Twain's description, Carroll's is not strictly speaking all one run-on sentence as there are a few new sentences, yet they all begin with conjunctions "and," which link the whole paragraph as though it were a single sentence.

In a short story "After the Storm," Ernest Hemingway an American writer and journalist also uses several conjunctions "and" in close succession:

Example 3.1.5

I said, 'Who killed him?' **and** he said 'I don't know who killed him, but he's dead all right,' **and** it was dark **and** there was water standing in the street **and** no lights or windows broke **and** boats all up in the town **and** trees blown down **and** everything all blown **and** I got a skiff and went out **and** found my boat where I had her inside Mango Key **and** she was right only she was full of water (3).

Now, study a more contemporary work in the following example (Example 3.1.6), a novel "All the Pretty Horses" written by an American writer Cormac McCarthy.

Example 3.1.6

There were a few last warm days yet **and** in the afternoon sometimes he and his father would sit in the hotel room in the white wicker furniture with the window open **and** the thin crocheted curtains blowing into the room **and** they'd drink coffee and his father would pour a little whiskey in his own cup and sit sipping it **and** smoking **and** looking down the street (4-5).

Notice that McCarthy connects here all independent clauses with the connective "and."

Note that Parataxis covers also the use of short, simple sentences (a.k.a. "segregating sentence"), without the use of conjunctions. Example below shows how Ernest Hemingway's description favors the use of Parataxis in his short story:

Example 3.1.7

Manuel drank his brandy. He felt sleepy himself. It was too hot to go out into the town. Besides there was nothing to do. He wanted to see Zurito. He would go to sleep while he waited (222).

Above, Hemingway's sentences are relatively simple and short. They are also not overtly linked. Should Hemingway wish to express the link between the sentences, he can choose overt markers of coordination (such as the conjunction "and") or the semicolon.

Now, by developing a series of segregating sentences to make a longer sequential statement, a writer can create breathless sequences of actions or

landscapes, and descriptions of the workings of the unconscious in a loose associated manner (a.k.a. “stream of consciousness” or “train of thought”).

Read the following examples (Example 3.1.8 and Example 3.19), first “A Farewell to Arm” by Ernest Hemingway, and then “The Golden Age” by Kenneth Grahame.

Example 3.1.8

I had gone to no place where the roads were frozen and hard as iron, where it was clear cold and dry and the snow was dry and powdery and hare-tracks in the snow and the peasants took off their hats and called you Lord and there was good hunting. I had gone to no such place but to the smoke of cafes and nights when the room whirled and you needed to look at the wall to make it stop, nights in bed, drunk, when you knew that that was all there was (19)

Example 3.1.9

And I'll look out for you, and you'll sing out as soon as you see me. And we'll go down the street arm in arm, and into all the shops, and then I'll choose my house, and you'll choose your house, and we'll live like princes and good fellows (86).

In both examples, the writers use segregating sentences to present the flow of thought of the character (narrator) in the scene.

REMARK 1: Although the components in the statement are continuous, they are open-ended and so loosely joined that they have no stopping place; one could go on and on adding phrases. To provide a clearer structural principle, some writers place a sequence of complete sentences one after the other in triadic style, or a **Triad**, by simply splitting them with either semicolons or commas. Example below presents

"Song of Myself" a work by Walt Whitman. Notice how the independent clauses are composed in three equal components.

Example 3.1.10

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable, I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world (Lawson 97).

As presented here, Whitman uses commas to join three independent clauses.

EXERCISE

Prompt 8: One Sentence Says It All

Instruction: Write about the scariest experience you ever had.

Limitations: Describe the experience in one sentence, no more than one hundred words. Use only paratactic constructions.

3.2 Hypotaxis

Hypotaxis is the opposite of Parataxis. Its structure expresses the arrangement of "unequal" constituents. The subordinate clause is itself divisible into phrases having grammatical functions at the clause rank (subject, verb, object, complement, or adverbial), and assumes a 'part-to-whole' relationship within its main clause.

James Baldwin in his "Notes of a Native Son" begins with general picture, and then fills in the details.

Example 3.2.1

When I was around nine or ten I wrote a play which was directed by a young, white schoolteacher, a woman, who then took an interest in me, and gave me books to read, and, in order to corroborate my theatrical bent, decided to take me to see what she somewhat tactlessly referred to as 'real' plays (Brooks 161).

The example above presents an independent clause (*When I was around nine or ten I wrote a play*), then an aggregation of subordinate constructions (*which was directed by a young, white schoolteacher, a woman, who then took an interest in me, and gave me books to read, and, in order to corroborate my theatrical bent, decided to take me to see what she somewhat tactlessly referred to as 'real' plays*).

REMARK 2: Unlike simple juxtaposition of elements by way of simple and compound sentences as in Parataxis, Hypotaxis creates a loose sentence (also called **a cumulative sentence**) by using dependent phrases or clauses as modifiers.

Notice that the subordinates structured in a cumulative can risk becoming open-ended. To avoid creates the cumulative details with no defined stopping place, some writers uses the dashes to separate the added details. Example 3.2.2 presents “Among My Books” by James Lowell, an American poet, editor, and a diplomat.

Example 3.2.2

Anybody might be an accuser,—*a personal enemy, an infamous person, a child, parent, brother, or sister* (134).

Lowell uses a dash to separate added clauses (*text in italics*, preferable substitute of the preceding statement ‘anybody might be an accuser.’) In another example, Amy Tan an American writer in her most-well known work “Joy Luck Club” also uses dash to separate the added details from the clause already used as an explanation or summary (clause in italics).

Example 3.2.3

Others thought we were possessed by demons—to celebrate when even within our own families we had lost generations, had lost homes and fortunes, and were separated, husband from wife, brother from sister, daughter from mother (11).

Here, Tan opens with the clause "Others thought we were possessed by demons," followed by the accumulated details (the text after dash) illustrating the preceding clause in more detail.

EXERCISE

Prompt 9: Paint a Portrait

Instruction: Write about a person you know well.

Limitations: Use a long cumulative sentence in hypotactic style, no more than one hundred words.

REMARK 3: There is another use of such interrupting construction, that is, when the subordinate elements split the main clause by intruding between the subject and the verb, and sometimes between the verb and the object. Study "Orlando" by Virginia Woolf below.

Example 3.2.4

He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters (13).

In the above example, Woolf presents an interpolated clause between the subject (He) and the verb (was). By putting the subordinate element between the subject and the verb (*for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it*) Woolf throws weight upon the words before and after the dashes and thus gives an emphasis on both the subject and the verb.

This interpolated construction can be called **convoluted style** or a convoluted sentence. Consider the following example of Alice Walker in her "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self." Notice how the clause inserted between the subject and the verb functions in the description.

Example 3.2.4

All I remember about her is that she once offered to pay my mother thirty-five cents for cleaning her house, raking up piles of her magnolia leaves, and washing her family's clothes, and that **my mother**—*she of no money, eight children, and a chronic ear-ache*—**refused** it (Wyrick 652).

In the work above, Walker momentarily sidetracks the readers from the sentence by giving them the subordinate element 'she of no money, eight children, and a chronic ear-ache' placed after and before the dashes to give them the afterthought of the mother's description.

EXERCISE

Prompt 10: Paint a Portrait

Instruction: Describe the same person previously written in Prompt 9.

Limitations: This time, add an interpolated clause into the description.

3.3 Fragment

In formal writing, fragment is generally a fault, and should be used very occasionally in formal consumption. In creative works, however, fragments are valuable for emphasis and sentence variety, as in "Rabbit at Rest" by John Updike below.

Example 3.3.1

Rabbit thinks he should may be say more, the kid looks wildly expectant, but enough. **Maybe. Enough** (Roth 39).

The statement above ends with fragments. But unlike academic writing or a more formal writing, the fragments here give different effect; they are rare, so a well-

placed fragment as such creates 'a compelling emphasis.' Updike uses here an intentional fragment one after another to emphasize a certain point of his story, the ending. Additionally, other writers generate longer fragment sequences, as in "Herzog" by a Canadian-born Jewish American writer Saul Bellow (Example 3.3.1), and "Second Skin" by an American novelist John Hawkes (Example 3.3.3).

Example 3.3.2

At this time he had no message for anyone. **Nothing. Not a single word** (69).

Example 3.3.3

That's it. **The sun in the evening. The moon at dawn. The still voice** (210).

Notice that in both works, the fragments are punctuated as a complete sentence.

Now the last example below presents a novel "Sophie's Choice" by an American novelist and essayist William Styron.

Example 3.3.4

This was not judgment day—on morning. **Morning: excellent and fair** (188).

With an intentional fragment (Morning: excellent and fair) added to the preceding statement (This was not judgment day—on morning), Styron adds detail to the scene (*excellent and fair*) while drawing the reader's attention.

EXERCISE

Prompt 11: One Word

Instruction: Rewrite your scariest experience in Prompt 8.

Limitation: This time, add one word to the ending of the description.

CREATIVE WRITING SAMPLE

Prompt: Select one technique from Chapter 3 to write a line describing a scene when you needed to be from home for a while.

SAMPLE 1

When I was first sent to a renal ward, it was on Monday night, on the 5th of May 2001, when the rain was steaming down and the wind howling, and I could smell the moisture in the air, the damp earth, walls, stairs, and drugs, and alcohol before I reached my sickroom.

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CREATIVE WRITING SAMPLE

Prompt: Create a scene which emphasizes on a one-word fragment placed at the end of the scene.

SAMPLE 2

A Magpie Robin flew above my Labrador—swiftly, past, and darted up, and down, and around; the dog laying sprawled on my bed, head resting between his front paws, groaned, and grunted; his tongue lapping out of the open mouth as the robin circled over his head, and bounced up and down—and away, and—**snap!**

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Chapter 4

EXERCISE 1

Instruction: Revise each passage below so the structure of the passage is no longer choppy.

Example It is very windy in winter. The weather is dry and cold. All the trees are bare. The leaves on the ground are brown. The sky is gray and clear.

It is very windy in winter—dry and cold. All the trees are bare; leaves on the ground, brown; the sky, gray and clear.

1. At six o'clock in the morning I got up. It rained. I went outside. My garden was green from the emerald dew. I walked barefoot over the wet grass.

2. Early in the morning the sun rose. Its rays touched the city. The light changed from gray to amber and pink. The slowly growing sound of a city woke up.

3. I am sitting in the corner by the window. I am alone. I look outside the window at nothing in particular. I thought I wish life could be like this every day.

4. I was exhausted. I then went to bed. The clock ticked loudly. It was too loud that I was barely unable to sleep.
