

Sentences and Style

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of the relationship between sentences and a writer's style. We will discuss the importance of varied sentences and the difference between active and passive voice.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. Sentences and Style
2. Sentence Variety
3. Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

1. Sentences and Style

In writing, **style** refers to the way someone writes, as opposed to *what* he or she writes. This includes word choice, tone, and sentence structure.



TERM TO KNOW

Style

The way a person writes, as opposed to what a person has written, including word choice, tone, and sentence structure.

We will be focusing on sentence structure in today's lesson; after all, it's one of the biggest components of any writer's style. The way you choose to put your sentences together should have a strong connection to the genre you're writing for, the audience you mean to read your work, and the goals you have in writing it.

When looking at writing from the sentence level, the primary goal should be clarity. This is particularly important for academic writing, since it's very easy to write complicated, convoluted sentences when conveying the complex ideas so often required by this kind of writing. Whenever possible, complex ideas should be expressed in simple sentences, so as to maximize clarity and to enhance the reader's understanding of the ideas.



HINT

Basically, when ideas are complicated, the language shouldn't be.

Understanding how to structure sentences with an eye for style requires a basic understanding of **syntax**, which is defined as the formation and ordering of words into sentences, as well as the study of how words are put in the sentences. In this lesson, we'll be looking from a couple of different angles at how an understanding of syntax can give writers more control over their sentences -- not just *what* they're saying, but *how*.



TERM TO KNOW

Syntax

The formation and ordering of words into sentences, as well as the study of how words are formed into sentences.

2. Sentence Variety

One of the best ways to ensure your readers are engaged with your writing is to provide them with a variety of sentence structures. Likewise, one of the easiest ways to make sure you bore your readers to death is to use the same sentence structures over and over again. This is called **sentence variety**, which means including sentences constructed in various ways, such as variations between simple and complex.



TERM TO KNOW

Sentence Variety

Including sentences constructed in various ways, such as variations between simple and complex.

Writing sentences in a variety of ways, including varying complexity, the number and type of clauses in them, as well as length and how sentences begin, will enhance the reader's experience with, and understanding of, your text. To see just how much of a difference a little sentence variety can make, consider the following paragraph:

Abortion is the most divisive issue in America. It is the only one that could drive us to conflict. At the core of the issue is the question of personhood. It's a question of who counts as human. The last time Americans were asking a question like that, we had The Civil War.

As you can see (and hear), this passage uses, for the most part, a very redundant sentence structure: short, simple sentences with only a single clause and primarily dependent on passive voice, which we will discuss later in the lesson. Now, however, look at this version:

Abortion is the single most divisive issue in America today and the only one that could possibly drive us to conflict on a broader scale than has been seen already. After all, at the core of the issue of abortion is the question of personhood -- the question of who counts as human -- and the last time Americans were divided on a question such as that, it ended in civil war.

Notice any difference? Not with the ideas. Both paragraphs make identical claims and introduce their topic in much the same way. However, the second version made use of a variety of sentence structures, and the result was a much more interesting paragraph.

As you can see, simply changing how sentences are built without changing any of the ideas -- or even many of the words -- can make a huge difference in the reading experience. How does this work? For the most part, experienced writers have developed a good ear for what kind of sentence structure will work best for whatever their purpose is. For beginning writers, though, there are some techniques that can help promote sentence variety.

- Combine shorter sentences
- Break up long sentences

This is the main difference in the second version of the paragraph. If you find that your text has too many long or overly complicated sentences, breaking up a couple into shorter, simpler ones will do wonders for breaking the monotony as well.

- Reorganize sentences in order to vary their structures and opening phrases

This is the most common strategy, and is especially useful if you notice your sentences tend to start in the same way or with the same words. A little bit of mixing can work magic.

3. Active Voice vs. Passive Voice

The other important aspect of sentence structure is active voice and passive voice. These are terms you've probably heard before from English teachers, but you might be surprised at how many students have trouble understanding what these terms are and, more importantly, what they can mean for writers.

Active voice is a sentence in which the emphasis is on the subject, the person or thing performing the action. Meanwhile, **passive voice** refers to sentences that emphasize the object, the person or thing receiving the action.



In general, active voice is considered to be stronger, more interesting, and clearer than passive voice constructions.



Active Voice

A sentence in which the emphasis is on the subject of the sentence, the person or thing performing the action.

Passive Voice

A sentence in which the emphasis is on the object of the sentence, the person or thing receiving the action.

Of course, there are times when it's important or strategic to use passive voice, like the famous politician's admission that "mistakes were made," which definitely avoids saying who might have made the mistakes. Or, if the subject is unimportant or unknown, passive voice is the way to go. That being said, overuse of passive voice or using it in situations that don't call for it can slow down a narrative and bore readers, in part because passive voice constructions tend to be repetitive.

Look at this sentence, for example.

The lamp got broken.

In this case, the use is strategic, by a writer who is attempting to avoid taking responsibility for the deed. However, unless you as a writer are trying to avoid saying who broke the lamp, why not just say:

I broke the lamp.

Readers are going to be asking the question anyway, which will probably distract them from the rest of the narrative or essay, and this is almost always a bad thing. Also, if you're trying to write anything more complicated than that, using passive voice will slow you down even more.

Consider this example:

The brakes were slammed on by her as the car slid down the hill.

This sentence puts the emphasis on the object of the action -- the brakes being slammed -- rather than the subject, her. It should sound strange, like something no one would ever actually say. Rather, you should write just as you speak, which is almost always in active voice:

She slammed on the brakes as the car slid down the hill.

Notice how much more quickly this sentence moves, and not just because it's shorter. By prioritizing the action in a more logical way, x does y to z, rather than y was done to z by x, your readers will have an easier time understanding what's happened, which improves the clarity of your writing.

Consider this very simple sentence:

The boy was bitten by the dog.

This isn't hard to understand, really. However, compare it to this active voice construction, which is both quicker and clearer:

The dog bit the boy.

Here is one last example:

The mid-term was failed by almost half the class.

Here again, there is a fairly simple idea to convey, but because of the passive construction, it's not immediately apparent to readers what's happened, because they lack the context provided by who's doing the action of failing until the very end of the sentence. If it was written like this, however, that confusion changes:

Almost half the class failed the mid-term.

Here, the sentence is not only shorter and clearer, but since it emphasizes the subject (almost half the class), the real point of the sentence comes through immediately. After all, the point wasn't to say that the mid-term was failed, but to see how many students failed it.



SUMMARY

Today we learned about the way sentence structures impact a writer's style. We learned about using sentence variety to avoid monotonous, repetitive sentences, as well as how choosing active voice over passive voice constructions can help us keep our writing quick, clear, and dynamic.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall



TERMS TO KNOW

Active Voice

A sentence in which the emphasis is on the subject of the sentence, the person or thing performing the action.

Passive Voice

A sentence in which the emphasis is on the object of the sentence, the person or thing receiving the action.

Sentence Variety

Including sentences constructed in various ways, including variations between simple and complex.

Style

The way a person writes, as opposed to what a person has written, including word choice, tone, and sentence structure.

Syntax

The formation and ordering of words into sentences as well as the study of how words are formed into sentences.