

Style and Sentences

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about how style affects a writer's sentences, and why it's important to consider how sentences are constructed in a piece of writing. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

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

1. Relationship Between Sentences and Style

Sentence structure is 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.

Understanding how to structure sentences with an eye for style requires a basic understanding of **syntax**, or the formation and ordering of words into sentences, as well as the study of how words are put in the sentences.

There are a couple of different perspectives from which to understand how syntax can give writers more control over their sentences—not just *what* they're saying, but *how*. We now look at these perspectives in more depth.



TERM TO KNOW

Syntax

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

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:

Drinking diet soda is unhealthy. Diet soda contains artificial sweeteners. Artificial sweeteners are dangerous chemicals. These chemicals cause health problems. Stomachaches and weight gain are some of the health problems. Avoid drinking diet soda.

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. Now, however, look at this version:

Drinking diet soda is like willingly ingesting poison. Misled by the zero-calorie beverages, consumers falsely believe that diet soda is a healthy alternative to sugary, non-diet sodas. Although the non-diet sodas are not healthy, they are less damaging than the diet versions. Consumers should avoid drinking diet soda because the ingredients in diet soda cause problematic, and oftentimes dangerous, health concerns.

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 can make a huge difference in the reading experience. 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 simple techniques that can help promote sentence variety:

- Combine shorter sentences.
- Break up longer sentences.
- Reorganize sentences to vary their structures and opening phrases.

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. Reorganization 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

Another important aspect of sentence structure is the concept of **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 construction in which the emphasis is on the subject—the person or thing performing the action. Meanwhile, passive voice refers to a sentence construction that emphasizes 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. There are times, though, when it's important or strategic to use passive voice, like the famous admission that “mistakes were made,” which avoids saying who might have made the mistakes. Or, if the subject is unimportant or unknown, passive voice can be the way to go.

That being said, overuse of passive voice or the use of 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.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** *The lamp got broken.*

In this sentence, the use of passive voice could be a strategic choice by a writer who is attempting to avoid taking responsibility for the accident. However, unless you as a writer are trying to avoid saying who broke the lamp, you may as well just write the sentence in active voice.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** *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.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** *The brakes were slammed by Mary 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, Mary. It sounds strange, like something no one would ever actually say. Rather, you should write just as you speak, which is almost always in active voice.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** *Mary 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), you make it easier for readers to understand what's happened, which improves the clarity of your writing.



TERMS TO KNOW

Active Voice

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

Passive Voice

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



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **relationship between sentences and style**. Sentence structures impact a writer's style by determining how the writer's message is conveyed. It's important to use **sentence variety** to avoid monotonous, repetitive sentences. You also learned about the difference between **active voice** and **passive voice** in sentences. Active voice constructions can help you keep your writing quick, clear, and dynamic, so they are often the better stylistic choice.

Best of luck in your learning!

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