

IMPROVING YOUR WRITING STYLE

1. Combine short choppy sentences to create smoother prose

Short sentences are most effective when used rarely; continually using short sentences creates stilted, awkward prose. However, neither should you start writing paragraph-long sentences! Rather, you should tend towards sentences of a reasonable length and use very short and very long sentences rarely and for emphasis.

Here's an example of a string of awkwardly short sentences:

- *The dog wanted a bone as usual. The girl gave the dog a bone. The dog was in the doghouse.*

And here's an improved version composed of only one sentence:

- *Since, as usual, the dog in his house wanted a bone, the girl gave him one.*

2. Employ sentence variation

Use a variety of phrases and clauses to avoid structuring each sentence in the same way. If you continually use the same rhythm, you will not interest your reader. In fact, your prose may become like a relentlessly dripping faucet: monotonous and painful. So, mix it up!

Take a look at these examples:

- *The dog wanted a bone as usual. The girl gave the dog a bone. The dog was in the doghouse.*

Do you see how all the sentences have the same general pattern: Subject—Verb—Object? The effect is monotonous, boring, and amateurish. Instead, try starting the sentence with other phrases or clauses to add variation! For example, don't always start with the subject of the main clause. One improved version of the sentence ("Since, as usual, the dog in his house wanted a bone, the girl gave him one.") starts with a subordinate clause, a clause that cannot stand on its own as a sentence. By combining the three shorter sentences, we put emphasis on the action in the independent clause, a clause that can stand on its own as a sentence: "the girl gave him one" (which is the most important idea in the sentence).

- *The Prime Minister approved of the policy, and the Prime Minister signed the bill. The policy was to give more money to schools. The schools had been under-funded for years.*

Again, the rhythm is monotonous due to the unchanging sentence structure. Here is an improved version: "Approving of the policy which was to give more money to the schools which had been under-funded for years, the Prime Minister signed the bill." This one sentence has become instantly more complex and interesting than the three short ones!

3. Use transitions

Transitions or stitching words can give fluidity to your prose; they also make clear the connections between your thoughts by indicating comparison (*similarly, likewise*), contrast (*but, however, on the other hand*), addition (*also, furthermore, moreover*), temporality (*previously, afterward, finally*), and the like. In an academic essay, transitions are even more essential because they tie together the separate pieces of your argument, acting as little signposts to show your reader how a new phrase, sentence, or paragraph follows from the one immediately previous. If your instructors have written comments on your papers like “choppy,” “jumpy,” “abrupt,” “flow,” “need signposts,” or “how is this related?,” you probably need to start using more transitions.

Here are two examples of how transitions can improve writing:

- *It was a dark and stormy night. Inside the lonely inn it was warm and delightful. The travelers sat gathered around the table. None of them had met before. They joked and told stories. They ate.*

See how choppy and disorganized this is? Try adding a few transitional words to demonstrate how all these separate thoughts fit together: “While it was indeed a dark and stormy night, inside the lonely inn it was warm and delightful. The travelers sat gathered around the table, and although none of them had met before, they joked and told stories while they ate.”

- *Our report demonstrates that low-calorie sweeteners are widespread in manufactured beverages. Corporations frequently do not advertise that their products contain low-calorie sweeteners. The drink packaging does not use the words “Light” or “Diet.” Consumers may not realize what these drinks contain. We recommend that regulations should address this form of false advertising.*

In this academic example, transitions are necessary not only for a smoother style, but to help the reader understand how the separate elements form a coherent argument. Here is a revised version: “Our report demonstrates that low-calorie sweeteners are widespread in manufactured beverages. However, corporations frequently do not advertise that their products contain low-calorie sweeteners; moreover, the drink packaging does not even use the words ‘Light’ or ‘Diet.’ Therefore, consumers may not realize what these drinks contain. For this reason, we recommend that regulations should address this form of false advertising.”

Credit: Adapted from Lydia Fash; Robert Cochran; Gordon Harvey, *Elements of the Academic Essay* (2009); UNC Writing Center “Transitions”; Harris, et al.

Children’s Drink FACTS 2019: Sales, Nutrition, and Marketing of Children’s Drinks (2019), 2020.

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