CHAPTER 6: CONSTRUCTING CLEAR SENTENCES

This chapter maps tactics for clear expression:

- Constructing sentences that reflect your evidence
- Using grammatical structures suited to the audience
- Designing sentences for persuasive effect
- Recognizing differences between written language and spoken language

MEANING WHAT YOU SAY. SAYING WHAT YOU MEAN

A clear sentence protects you against readers, especially against the kinds of readers you encounter at work and at college. These readers feel an obligation to take you at your word -- your written word -- and if you say what you mean, and you do it clearly, they will be happy. But if you are ambiguous, incomplete, contradictory, and unclear, you will become the victim of a careful reader.

You already know the subject, but readers know less than the writer. Even if they know about the subject, they treat your sentences as sources of new information. They want to know exactly how you think, and thus, you have to write so that the sentence means the same to both you and the reader. Sentence structure is vital to creating this common ground.

This chapter offers tactics for creating exactly the kinds of sentences that will connect you with your readers. It is not an exhaustive look at grammar, sentence structures, and the other thousands of topics related to sentences. Instead, it offers the major categories for thinking about the effectiveness of your sentences. The complexity and clarity of your sentences depends on many features including modifiers, voice, tense.

SENTENCE COMPLEXITY

Sentences fall into four major types. A mix of these types gives you flexibility in expressing your ideas, avoids boredom, and cements the bond between you and your reader. The key is to recognize what you are doing when you choose a particular type of sentence. If you are conscious of your sentence tactics, you can adapt them as you revise. Knowing the vocabulary for these types of sentences can help you write more clearly. Consider the following chart:

Sentence Type	Definitions	Example
Simple	One independent clause and no dependent clauses	Music censorship is wrong.
Compound	Two or more independent clauses and no dependent clauses	Music censorship is wrong; it is a violation of the First Amendment.
Complex	One or more dependent clauses and one independent clause	Because we are promised free speech by the First Amendment, music censorship should be prohibited.
Compound-complex	One or more dependent clauses and two or more independent clauses	Because we are promised free speech by the First Amendment, music censorship should not be allowed, and teenagers should be permitted to listen to whatever music they choose.

These different types of sentences create transitions. For example, a compound sentence often uses a semicolon to show that two ideas are closely related to each other. A complex sentence uses a word like "because" to show cause and effect. This too is a transitional device because it links ideas. Compound-complex sentences rely on many transitional devices. They often appear in Function #4 sentences.

The issue is not entirely about sentence complexity. It is simultaneously about the complexity of issues and finding the right kind of sentence structure to embody the ideas. A simple declarative sentence like "Music censorship is wrong" is grammatically correct, but it does not uncover the

important issues attached to that idea in the same way that the compound-complex sentence does. The simple sentence can emphasize an idea or name a fact, but it does not really serve complex thinking. Let's take a look at the opening of a student's paper to see how sentence types affect how we read:

A writing process is a series of steps that takes a writer from just a thought or an idea to a finished product. Only great writers have developed a process that works well for them and even they still struggle with it. I know I have a process for writing, but I am not sure that it was a well developed process before entering my English 1180 class. Because the process that I have been taught is well developed, it is a great way to produce a final product of a paper. I combined the process that I learned from him with my own to create a new and improved process. Now that my writing-to-learn steps now include a brainstorming concept map, TEQ Sheet, Purpose & Problems Statement, and a Prospectus, writing is not such a struggle, and I think more clearly. How do the writing-to-learn steps that I do before writing my paper reflect on the final product of my paper? My emotional opinions, ideas, and beliefs are tucked away inside of my brain and in order to make them known to the public I have to go through my writing-to-learn process steps to produce a final paper. In order to fill a gap in the map of what's known, I have to develop a claim and connect it to established experts. My personal ideas become a part of public discourse through my process of writing and once they are shared I can not take them back. The only way to create a fully-developed paper is to go through a process that connects my ideas with what others have said. To do this in my paper I will propose my claim that my ideas are personal to me until I write a paper about them and they become public when I connect them to the known community discourse.

This simple sentence takes a "thing" and defines it. The reader needs a quick, clear picture of the paper's subject.

This compound sentence builds the idea by connecting it to another issue: "struggle."

This compound sentence also builds the idea by connecting it to yet another idea: every writer struggles.

This complex sentence supports a comparison; the complex structure serves the complex idea.

This simple sentence expands what has been said in the previous sentence. These two sentences operate in tandem.

This compound-complex sentence connects major ideas from previous sentences.

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Practice

Review the meanings of each type of sentence, and then look at each of the remaining sentences. Set up a chart similar to this one that names the type of sentence and then explains how the type of sentence serves the idea expressed and/or the content.

Each of the sentences in this paper has a specific function depending on the sort of evidence and the point that it tries to make. The various types of sentences become tools for clearly conveying the paper's content.

Modifiers

Modifiers are words that describe some of the other words in a sentence.

- A modifier can be a single word: "I have a **black** dog," where the word "black" modifies or describes the dog.
- A modifier can be an adjective clause: "Barbara, **who was my best friend**, moved to Chicago," where "who was my best friend" further defines Barbara.
- The third type of modifier is a prepositional phrase: "**With the help of four cups of coffee**, I was able to stay up all night and study," where "With the help of four cups of coffee" describes how you were able to stay up all night.

Remember that a sentence begins with a basic statement that requires only a verb and a subject, but that those two simple elements are clarified in some way by every other part of speech in the sentence. The subject and verb are the most powerful elements of sentences. Everything else is dragged along by their power.

Misplaced modifiers

Additional information placed too far from the word that it describes is called a misplaced modifier. For example, "The police stopped the car on the freeway that had been speeding." Reasonable people know that the writer meant that the car had been speeding, but that is not what the words on the page say. The words say that it was the freeway that had been speeding. That is nonsense, and you probably ask why a reader would be so literal. First, it is a mark of respect. If you wrote it, you must have made sure that what you meant was in the words. Consider the following: "Waiting for the elevator to come, a mouse ran through the crowd." The reader might think that it is the mouse that was waiting for the elevator, or that the crowd was waiting. Either one makes sense, but the writer needs to be clear about who is doing the waiting. As is, it is the mouse that is waiting because the very first noun after the phrase "Waiting for the

elevator to come" is "the mouse." Readers attach the modifier to the noun, and suddenly the reader is baffled. Just as we expect an adjective to be near the noun it describes, so also do we expect the modifying phrase to be near whatever it modifies. The reader has to stop and make a judgment: "Uh . . . a mouse waiting for an elevator seems less likely than a crowd of humans waiting for the elevator."

Exercises

Review the following sentences to identify similar problems with misplaced modifiers.

- The picnic table is on the lawn that we just finished painting.
- Daisy and Donovan decided to have two children on their wedding day.
- Perched on the treetop, we listened to the cheerful song of the robin.
- I was secretly hoping that the play would be a failure in the back of my mind.
- My father bought me my first car at the age of sixteen.

Dangling modifiers

A dangling modifier is a word or phrase that describes something that is not in the sentence. "Suspicious of her roommates, her desk drawer was always kept locked." This might seem sensible; after all, a suspicious roommate might keep her desk locked, but that is not what the sentence says. Someone is suspicious, but the sentence does not put the person in the sentence. The only noun is "desk drawer." By default, "being suspicious" applies to the desk drawer. That is nonsense. Most readers will backtrack and say, "Oh, if she's suspicious of her roommates, *she* would keep the desk drawer locked." These readers are doing the writer's work by plugging in the missing pronouns. Many readers will become confused and either refuse to figure out what needs to be inserted, or they will dismiss the entire sentence with an annoyed wave of the brain.

Exercises
- While playing tennis, Sam's wrist was sprained.
- Despite running both a 120 volt and a 220 volt recharging system, the marketing department at General Motors still has to allay concerns about the battery system.

> - When taking the final exam, my pen ran out of ink.
> - Despite taking care of my parents, raising my children, and going to work, my day also has times reserved for my own needs.
> - Having finished her homework, Jean's iPod was turned on.

Parallelism

A list becomes easy to read when each item has a single form. For example, "My brother is attractive, rich, and has a lot of intelligence," is not a parallel sentence. To make this parallel, we have to recognize that "attractive" and "rich" are adjectives. They establish a pattern that demands that the following item also be an adjective. Alas, "has a lot of intelligence" is not an adjective. It is a verb phrase ("has") that continues the list. Because it is different from the pattern that has already been established, it is called "non-parallel." It runs counter to the pattern. The real issue is that such changes interrupt the flow of the sentence. They make readers subtly shift their thinking, and this distracts from the writing. In speech, we often use non-parallel structures to emphasize an item in the list. Our voice pauses, and the item takes on its own life. In speech, that works well, but in writing it does not.

Errors in parallel structure often appear when we use two common structures: gerunds and infinitives. An infinitive is a verbal that consists of the word "to" and the verb. For example, "I like to read fictional stories." The infinitive is "to read." An inexperienced writer might write, "I like to read fictional stories, to watch movies, and going out for lunch." Again, the meaning is clear, but the inconsistent structure makes the reader work too hard. The "going out to lunch" has an "ing" verbal called a gerund. The reader trips because it seems to suggest that a new sentence is about to begin. "Going out for lunch is a pleasure." This would be an independent clause, but the expectation is violated when the phrase turns out to be the third in a string of modifiers. The sentence could be reconstructed in two ways, using all infinitives or all gerunds. The key is to avoid mixing them:

I like to read fictional stories, to watch movies, and to go out for lunch.

I like reading fictional stories, watching movies, and going out for lunch.

Either choice is acceptable because the parallel structure gives them an easy flow of ideas that simplifies the work of the reader.

A good writer is like a good detective; the first question is, "Whodunnit?" Some kinds of sentences immediately tattle on the doer of the action: "Mary made mistakes." The reader knows who is guilty: Mary. An actor performs an action. Such sentences are called "active" and they efficiently present the relation between nouns, verbs, and objects. The subject performs the verb. By naming Mary, we stop pretending that the mistakes happened by themselves. A more weaseling sentence uses passive voice: "Mistakes were made." Here, it is the subject who receives the action; there is no emphasis on whatever/whoever is responsible.

Active voice is clear, vigorous, and concise. On the other hand, sentences afflicted by passive voice are longer, slower, and less clear. Of the two previous sentences, one is active and the other passive. Note the speed with which they move. The long, slow, confusing aspects of passive voice may seem a weakness, but they are useful when you want to lull your reader to sleep so that they cannot hold you responsible, recognize unfortunate results, or otherwise understand information you would prefer to hide.

Exercises

Note how the following sentences hide the "doer" of the action. Rephrase them into active voice.

- Collateral damage was produced by faulty coordinate inputs.
- My car was damaged by the collision with the wall.
- In the play, it is shown that Hamlet can't make a decision.
- While you were out of the house, the cookies were eaten.
- In high school, I was told to not write papers with my own claim.

Consistent Verb Tense

When you begin with a specific verb tense -- past, present, future -- you have made a decision about what will best serve your reader. Readers accept your choice, and they feel that they have made an agreement with you. Using the same tense throughout a paper makes everyone's life easier, and the communication clearer. Occasionally, this agreement is violated, and when it happens, the reader becomes confused. For example, when you begin telling a story with the past tense, the reader assumes that you are talking about things that have already taken place. If

you are writing about Prohibition, and you write: "Prohibition created an immense, illegal market for alcohol, and it is a rip-roaring good time when the whiskey boat arrives," your reader will be confused. You have said that Prohibition created a market, and suddenly it sounds as if there is a boat filled with whiskey coming around now. The jump between the two is baffling. Either you are changing the subject, or you have left out something that ties together the two time periods.

Many writers use tense shifts to emphasize the importance of an action in the past. The writer establishes a set of facts or a narrative. As the tension or importance increases, the writer shifts to present tense to show the importance of what is happening. One student wrote, "For fifteen class sessions we mixed chemicals, adjusted Bunsen burners, and prepared our thermometers. Each day was filled with the tiny details that prepared for the experiments. And then Johnny comes along and dumps the acid and water together and it goes all over the place." While Johnny's behavior is important and the point of the story, it cannot be presented via a verb that says his action is happening right now. It is not accurate and it confuses the reader. When we *tell* stories, this sort of shift is highly effective. We show that there is a single story with our body language, voice, and gestures. In writing, we do not have these handy tools to help us keep the reader clear about the time frame of the story. Thus, shifting verb tense is "wrong" only in some contexts. It is not always wrong in writing either; many novels shift to present tense when they present a dream sequence within a story. Often, it is emphasized with italic print, but the real signal that we are in a different realm are the present tense verbs. Dreams are intensely present, so it makes sense to use present tense. Of course, it would also make sense to show intense action in present tense, but that is outside of what your audience sees as acceptable. What are the general rules for tense shifts?

1. Use one tense and stick to it unless the subject requires a change.
> a. *A sentence with an appropriate shift in tense*: President Nixon **was elected** in 1968, but he i**s condemned** for his role in the Watergate scandals. The first part of the sentence reports on an event in the past and uses "**was elected**" to show it was in the past. The sentence adds another fact about what people think *now,* and to show that these beliefs are current, uses present tense: "**is condemned**."

b. A sentence with a mistaken shift in tense: After running, Michael **swims** a mile, and then he **biked** for five more miles. Michael seems to swim in the present but to bike in the past even though the sentence seems to want to say that the events form a sequence. The verbs should be consistent.

2. Change verb tense only when you want to show an actual time shift.

a. Yesterday **I went** to the grocery store, but today **I am going** back to buy bread. Consider how this would sound if we *did not* shift tenses: "Yesterday **I went** to the grocery store, but now I **was going** back to buy bread." The word "yesterday" announces a past event, and it gets a past tense verb. The word "now" announces the present tense, but in this case it has a past tense verb, "was going" and the contradiction is confusing.

If you want to write so that the audience understands your work, you have to know how to control tense shifts.

Spoken Language vs. Written Language

The spoken word operates in a much different world than the written word. When you speak, you use gestures, facial expressions, changes in the rhythm of your speech, changes in the volume of your voice, and a host of other tools to clarify your ideas for the listener. The *spoken words* of a speech play only one role in a very large performance. These various tools create a message that enables the listener to hear what you mean to say. If you have had to give a speech, you have probably bolded some of the words you want to emphasize, used long series of dots to remind yourself to pause, and listened to yourself to discover where you needed to change the pacing so that the listeners understood what you had to say. Effective speaking is a skill with its own set of tools.

Writing also has its own set of tools, but they are not the same tools as the speaker's tools. Because there is not a literal speaker, you have to choose punctuation, sentence variety, careful grammatical structure and other tools that give your work the "voice" that "speaks" to the audience. When we listen to a speaker, we have an instinctive understanding of "punctuation." The punctuation lies in the speech patterns that the reader hears. But when it comes to writing,

we are far less comfortable, and the "punctuation" is not instinctive. The rules are precise and tell the reader how to understand the words.

A group of first-term students discussed the difference between writing and speaking with their instructor. Everyone recognized that the students were articulate and lively in discussion, but that the papers fell far below that level. The students named important differences:

Speech	Writing
The audience is there: you get a reaction that tells you how you're doing.	The audience is more abstract and "unembodied"; you have to constantly remind yourself about what they know and what they care about.
When you talk, you not only get to watch your audience, but also you literally hear yourself and can add material as it's needed.	You have to develop your ideas without knowing what the audience needs. What you "hear" as you write doesn't get constantly checked by any response except your own.
Conversations are enriched and clarified by interaction.	Unless you're writing a collaborative paper -- not much chance of that -- there's almost no feedback as you build the paper; if there is feedback, it only comes after you've written material.
Listeners can usually tell if the speaker is presenting information or offering an interpretation or a personal opinion.	Because the thesis is hard to separate from the evidence, it's hard for readers to separate the evidence from the interpretation of the evidence.
Tends to give a bigger picture; it synthesizes information.	Tends to take apart ideas and information to understand them.
Uses general skills from other realms of experience.	The required skills are specific to writing: colleges usually have "writing centers," but they don't usually have "talking centers."
Body, voice, tone are a "natural grammar." The physical expressions to convey emotions, beliefs, doubts, etc. are widely shared.	Written grammars are artificial because they require us to memorize rules and formulas that are not familiar to many readers and writers.
It's a social activity.	It's typically done alone.
Complex ideas can be suggested through the "grammar" of gesture, story, etc.	A good vocabulary is essential.
Narrative is a big help, and narrative is a comfortable mode.	Narrative is more abstract, and often used as a tool for making an argument.

Sometimes, these two types of communication may seem to overlap, but the differences

are real. In writing, we have a smaller range of tools, and each of them controls the *written words* on the page. Both writer and reader share relatively strict rules about how they should be understood. Punctuation, grammar rules, and organizational patterns control the meaning that the reader is allowed to take away from the page. Writers and readers adopt specific roles, and like the actors of a tightly scripted play, they enact the rules so the written word is limited and controlled. The written word controls and limits the meaning through these rules just as the speaker controls and limits the meaning through her tools.

SUMMARY

Sentences are tools. They are delicate, and can be broken in ways that make them unusable. On the other hand, if we know how to use them, we can build documents that mean the same thing to both the reader and the writers. Carefully used, sentences reduce misunderstanding, expose information, and make clear the distinction between evidence and the interpretation of evidence. They are part of writing honestly and persuasively. At the heart of good writing is the ability to put the meaning into the words on the page. A basic knowledge of sentences helps you structure sentences that convey your meaning. It is not just a matter of controlling your reader; it is also a matter of being clear so that your reader can challenge you and continue to sharpen the understanding that everyone seeks. Thinking about sentences is the vehicle for understanding how grammar serves content.

Looking Ahead

The next chapter is about diction. Diction goes beyond questions of grammar by recognizing how the structure and vocabulary of a sentence have to be tailored to the needs and expectations of the audience. You will learn how to use the sorts of diction that signal your status as a careful, skilled writer.