

Varying Sentence Structures and Lengths

There are four basic sentence structures, Use a variety of structures when you write.

A simple sentence has one main clause, which has a subject and a predicate.

The brave soldiers held the high ground.

A **compound sentence** contains *two or more* main clauses. The clauses are linked by a coordinating conjunction, and are usually preceded by a comma or a semicolon.

The soldiers huddled in the trenches, but their general paced above them in plain sight.

A **complex sentence** has one main clause and one or more subordinate clauses.

After watching the others leap from the plane, the young parachutist summoned all his courage and followed suit.

Think: This sentence begins with a subordinate clause.

A **compound-complex sentence** has *two or more* main clauses and *one or more* subordinate clauses.

The young woman tentatively walked onto the high diving board, and although she had butterflies in her stomach, she bravely waited for the signal from her coach below.

You also will improve the quality of your writing by mixing long sentences with short ones. Lengthen choppy sentences by combining sentences or by adding descriptive details and facts. Shorten long compound and complex sentences by dividing them into simple sentences. Keep In mind that a string of similarly long compound or complex sentences can be tedious to read.

Here is a way to break up the compound-complex sentence about the nervous diver

The young woman tentatively walked onto the high diving board although she had butterflies in her stomach, She bravely waited for the signal from her coach below.

TEST-TAKING TIP

When you look over your essay to improve it, do not hesitate to combine choppy sentences whenever it is feasible to do so. When you combine choppy sentences, many times you can make your point with more accuracy and force, and in a more thoughtful and sophisticated manner.

Varying Sentence Beginnings

Study these ways to add diversity to your sentences by varying the way they begin.

Start with an **adverb**.

Gallantly, Wayne urged his troops to charge the enemy's line.

Start with a **prepositional phrase**.

With great gallantry, Wayne urged his troops to charge the enemy's line.

Start with a **participial phrase**.

Displaying great gallantry, Wayne urged his troops to charge the enemy's line.

Start with a **subordinate clause**.

As gallantly as he could, Wayne urged his troops to charge the enemy's line.

Start with the **predicate**.

Into the enemy's line charged Wayne and his gallant troops.

Vary the kinds of sentences you write to make your viewpoint clearer. Vary them also to *show emphasis*; for instance, place a short sentence between longer ones so that it will stand out. Read the following:

There was a mad scramble on the rig when the crew noticed an enormous iceberg moving toward them at one knot. The weather conditions were frightening and added to the chaos. Winds shook the rig's platform, and huge waves crashed against it. Fear was on everyone's face. The only thing left to do was to pull the rig's several massive anchors up and try to haul the heavy structure out of danger.

You Try It

Here again is the opening paragraph:

Courage means standing up for what you believe in. Courage means not turning the other cheek. Courage means doing what is right. It does not mean doing what is popular. Courage means doing what is best. It does not mean doing what is easiest. It means saddling up for your principles. It means not hiding from the truth.

Rewrite it, focusing on using a variety of sentence types and structures. Try to vary the ways that the sentences begin. Also, try to write both long and short sentences. Add information or ideas, as needed, to add to the clarity and variety.
