

Writing Effective Sentences: Presentation Notes

You've spoken English for years, you've completed numerous writing assignments, you've passed your composition courses. You know all there is to know about sentences, right?

Not necessarily.

When we're assigned writing tasks, we often get distracted by the content: what we need to say, what questions we need to answer, how we prove our arguments are valid. We forget to address the building blocks of writing. Improving your sentences is the easiest way to bring your writing to a higher level.

A sentence:

- Has a sequence of words

This is pretty easy to spot – a sentence has words in it! While some spoken sentences can be as short as one word (“No,” “Yes”), most written sentences are two or more words long. There's no set limit on how many words you can have in a sentence. Pay attention to what your sentences sound like, and add or remove words as needed.

- Contains a subject and a predicate

Sentences can be broken down into parts based on how the words in a sentence are used.

- A subject is who or what a sentence is about.
- A predicate is a verb describing the subject's actions or state of being.
- Sometime sentences also include an object, a person or thing that is affected by the action of a predicate.
 - *Example:* She (subject) drinks (predicate) milk (object).

- Expresses a complete thought

A sentence should start and finish a single thought without trailing off into another thought or stopping short of full expression.

- *Correct:* Jacob took the bus.

This example contains a subject (“Jacob”), a predicate (“took”), and an object (“the bus”). The complete thought is expressed in this sentence without need for revision.

- *Incorrect:* After Jacob took the bus.

Even though the second sentence contains the same subject, predicate, and object as the first, the word “after” means that the sentence should contain more information. We don't know what happened after Jacob took the bus, so the thought is unfinished.

- Is an independent clause

This links to the other aspects of a sentence, but it's worth mentioning on its own. A sentence must be an independent clause or it's not a sentence. An independent clause is a group of words containing a subject, a predicate, and a *complete* thought. There are also dependent clause, which contain a subject and a predicate but *not* a complete thought.

Different Sentence Patterns

- 1) Simple Sentence: one independent clause
Joe waited for the train.
- 2) Compound Sentence: two or more independent clauses
Joe waited for the train, but the train was late.
Joe waited for the train; however, Mary and Samantha got on the bus.
- 3) Complex Sentence: one independent clause PLUS one or more dependent clauses
 - a) Cause/Effect: *Joe waited for the train because he needed to get to New York.*
 - b) Comparison/Contrast: *Joe waited for the train while Mary and Samantha left on the bus.*
 - c) Place/Manner: *Joe waited for the train at the train station.*
 - d) Possibility/Conditions: *Joe waited for the train whether it was raining or not.*
 - e) Relation: *Joe waited for the train which was late.*
 - f) Time: *Joe waited for the train before Mary and Samantha got on the bus.*
- 4) Compound-Complex Sentence: two or more independent clauses PLUS one or more dependent clauses
 - a) *Joe waited for the train, but Mary and Samantha left on the bus because they did not see Joe at the train station.*
 - b) *Because Joe waited for the train, he was late to work, but it wasn't his fault.*

Find more examples and explanations at the following website provided by the Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/sentence-patterns/>

DO

- Follow the rules of grammar and spelling.
 - This is something you want to do for any sentence you write, whether it's for an academic paper or an email. Practicing the rules of accepted grammar and spelling can help you stick to them easier, and it can cause you less stress and work when writing papers and essays.
- Make a definite point – and stick to it.
 - Some subjects that you will be asked to write about have many topics that relate to them. Be sure to stick to your subject.
 - For example, if you're writing about psychoanalysis, you shouldn't go

into a lengthy discussion about the life of Sigmund Freud. Although Freud is considered one of the founders of psychoanalysis, your paper is not a biography of Freud but instead a study of psychoanalysis, so there's no reason to devote more than a sentence or two towards mentioning Freud.

- Use appropriate words and tone.
 - There are huge differences between spoken English and written English:
 - Written language tends to be more complex than speech with longer sentences and many subordinate clauses. Some punctuation and layout of written language also have no spoken equivalent: you can't "say" an indent and you wouldn't cite references at the end of a conversation the way you do at the end of an essay.
 - Spoken language tends to be full of repetitions, incomplete sentences, corrections and interruptions, with the exception of formal speeches and other scripted forms of speech, such as news reports.
 - Due to the differences in written and spoken language, some words or phrases commonly used when speaking can sound harsher or even downright rude when written. This is also true of more informal or "conversational" language. Written language isn't always academic, but it also shouldn't be treated the same way you would treat a conversation with your friends or family.
 - Always remember: write to others (via email, texts, or papers) in the same tone that you would like to read as a member of the audience.
 - Treat every piece of written communication as though it could be found and shared with millions of people: edit thoroughly for simple errors or spelling mistakes, proofread to make sure you're saying what you mean to say, and always consider your audience when choosing words to use or the tone in which to write.
- Vary your sentence patterns, types, and lengths.
 - The four sentence patterns listed above should be mixed together in your writing to create pleasant communication that has a nice, flowing rhythm to it. Using only simple sentences makes your writing sound short and blunt; using only complex-compound sentences makes your writing long-winded and possibly condescending. Vary the sentences patterns you use in your writing assignments to make key points stand out and to grab readers' attention.

DO (continued)

- There are also various types of sentences:
 - Affirmative: sentences used to describe any general action, event, speech, or expression.
 - Example: Every student is present today.
 - Negative: sentences used to state something is false; usually include “not,” either as a single word or in a contraction (“isn’t” = “is not”).
 - Example: Not every student is present today.
 - Declarative: sentences that make a statement or assertion.
 - Example: Mark likes to play chess.
 - Exclamatory: sentences that express strong feelings or emotions and usually end with an exclamation mark.
 - Example: That’s fantastic!
 - Interrogative: sentences that ask questions and end with a question mark.
 - Example: Where did he learn to play chess?
 - Imperative: sentences that express requests, commands, or advice. The subject is an understood you.
 - Example: Tell him to stop playing chess.

- Varying the lengths of your sentences is closely tied to the sentence pattern you use. Simple sentences tend to be much shorter than compound-complex sentences, which are usually the longest sentences of all. Just as you would vary your sentence patterns, you should vary your sentences lengths so you have a mix of short, normal, and longer length sentences.

- Write clearly and concisely.
 - Explain your concepts and your topics but don’t *over-explain* them. You want to ensure your audience understand what you’re discussing while also making sure to keep your writing on-subject and easy to read. This may involve breaking a concept down into a simpler explanation, or summarizing pages of information into a few sentences.

 - This becomes easier with practice, but the Writing Center can also help you to figure out the best way to summarize a lot of material. Usually, if you can talk to a friend about a concept so that your friend can understand it, you can summarize it in a paper for an audience to understand.

- Proofread your writing.

- This is one of the final steps in drafting an essay, and one of the most important. Proofreading your writing helps you to keep it polished while also improving your ability to understand the information you discuss.
- If you have a hard time finding errors or mistakes when proofreading, try these tips to help you better spot them:
 - Let your paper “rest”. Get away from your paper for a little while; take an hour or even a day and leave your writing alone. When you come back to proofread and revise your writing, your mind and eyes will be fresh. After a break from writing, you’re more likely to find mistakes you may have missed otherwise, and to correct them properly.
 - Print out your paper/assignment/essay and read it. Seeing your writing on paper helps you spot things you might miss on a computer screen.
 - Ask a friend to proofread your writing. After spending a lot of time on an assignment, you may become accustomed to how it looks and your eyes may skip or skim over mistakes.
 - Don’t rely on spelling and grammar check. Spell check is very useful for finding minor errors and helping you to correct them, and grammar check can point out areas in your writing that may need revision. The downfall of these computer-operated tools, however, is that they cannot read the context of your writing. You may have spelled a word correctly, but it wasn’t the word you meant or needed to use in that sentence. You may have used a comma that isn’t actually necessary because the grammar check misunderstood the type of sentence you were trying to write. Be sure to double check any suggestions spell or grammar check gives you, and use your own judgment when editing.

DON’T

- Use a synonym you don’t understand
 - For example, *employ* and *manipulate* are both synonyms of *use*, but they have very different meanings.
 - *Use* means “to take, hold, or deploy something as a means of accomplishing a purpose.”
 - *Employ* can mean “to make use of” but more often means “to give work (to someone) and pay for them to do it.”
 - *Manipulate* can also mean “to handle or control (a tool/mechanism)” but usually means “to control or influence (a person or situation) cleverly/unfairly”
 - Using these words as substitute for *use* in a sentence may change the

meaning of the sentence, or the sentence may no longer make sense.

- I could *use* the help.
- I could *employ* the help.
- I could *manipulate* the help.

- **Tip:** If you feel like you're using a word too many times, look for different ways to write or word a sentence to avoid using that word.
 - Example: You may use the word "because" more often in your papers than you think. Find other words to use in place of "because" or figure out alternative ways to phrase your sentences:
 - Pollution should be regulated because it harms the environment.
 - Pollution should be regulated *as* it harms the environment.
- There are some cases where using a word "too much" can't be helped, especially if the word relates to a very specific concept or is a common term in your area of study. In this case, just use the word as you normally would and don't worry about "overusing" it in your paper.
 - Example: You're writing an argumentative paper about the effects of pollution on the environment, so the words "pollute" and "pollution" are mentioned many times throughout your essay. This is fine – since your essay is about "pollution," there's no need to try to use the word less or to find another way to phrase your sentences.
- Pad your sentences with meaningless "fluff"
 - **Fluff** is information or words that aren't necessary to understand the main point of your writing. You're most tempted to use fluff sentences to "pad" your paper to reach a certain page or word count requirement.
- Go off on "tangents" in your sentences
 - **Tangents** are sentences that turn away from the main point or topic of an essay or paragraph and onto a related, semi-related, or even unrelated topic. These sentences may start well but end up turning a paragraph into a jumble of sentences that don't connect with one another or the essay as a whole.
- Write in text-speak
 - Phrases like "lol," "IMO," or "tbh" shouldn't be used in academic writing, or any writing outside of texting. Abbreviations like this are not standard, recognized abbreviations like "APA" or "U.S." and may be confusing. The use of abbreviations found in text-speak is also extremely informal, and suggests that you don't take an assignment seriously.
- Make your words too "flowery"
 - Description is nice, but in academic writing you want to avoid too much of it,

especially in argumentative essays. Focus instead on writing concisely so your readers can readily understand the concepts you're explaining.

- Forget: subject, predicate, and complete thought

There are many different steps in the process of writing effectively. Writing clear, concise, and communicative sentences is one of the most important steps you can take to improve your writing, both academically and professionally. I hope that this handout serves as a good reference for any difficulties you may have when composing sentences.