

Rubric Category	Language and Syntax
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CCSS Writing Standards	W1d, Language 3, L3a
Argument Type	All arguments

Creating Basic Sentence Variety

Students practice different approaches for creating sentence variety to develop style.

Understanding the Expectations

This lesson will focus on varying your sentence length, varying your sentence types, and varying your sentence openers. Your purpose in doing so is to achieve more dynamic writing. This means that when you write with a variety of sentence patterns, your writing is livelier and more energetic. It's also more interesting. There's nothing worse than monotonous sentences patterns. These make writing boring and drag on. The solution is to use the three strategies you'll practice here which offer simple ways of creating texture in your writing. You will simply be working with syntax, which is the arrangement of words in a sentence. As a writer, you should try to use many different patterns of language in your sentences to create a pleasing rhythm and flow. The goal of changing up your syntax is to enhance what you say and never to distract from it.

Here are three basic ways to use syntax to your advantage when you write:

1. Varying Sentence Length

Short and long sentences both have a place in strong writing. Short sentences often serve to make a very direct and clear point, while longer sentences can connect several ideas and create a sense of “flow” in the reading. However, overusing either short or long sentences creates problems. Too many short sentences will render your prose choppy while too many long ones will make it burdensome and tiring to read. To create sentence variety, one simple approach is to combine short sentences into longer ones and break up long sentences if they become hard to follow.

Consider the following examples:

Too many long sentences may sound boring and long winded...

Fall is a wonderful time of year for many reasons and I always try to make the most of this season. My favorite things about the fall are the changing leaves, the cooler weather, Halloween, pumpkin spice muffins, and football. A special memory I have from the fall is going to the Great Pumpkin Blaze and seeing the thousands of carved and lit pumpkins glow in the inky black night.

Too many short sentences may sound choppy and unpolished...

Fall is a wonderful time of year. I always try to make the most of this season. My favorite things about the fall are the leaves and the weather. I also like Halloween and pumpkin spice muffins. Football is a nice fall sport too. A special memory I have is he Great Pumpkin Blaze. I saw thousands of pumpkins.

A variety of long and short sentences sounds just right...

Fall is a wonderful time of year. I always try to make the most of this season and its many special features. My favorite things about the fall are the changing leaves, the cooler weather, Halloween, and pumpkin spice muffins. Of course, there's also football! A special memory I have from the fall is going to

the Great Pumpkin Blaze and seeing the thousands of carved and lit pumpkins glow in the inky blackness. That was a magical night.

2. Rearranging a sentence

Every complete sentence contains an independent clause—a subject and its verb or predicate, like *“Her plane landed safely.”* We sometimes call this the main clause, because even if we add more to the sentence, that clause still contains the most important message.

Consider how the sentence feels if we add information before the main clause:

- *Despite the violent turbulence brought on by the impending tropical storm, her plane landed safely.*

The sentence contains a kind of suspense as the reader waits to learn the important information.

On the other hand, we can reverse that order:

- *Her plane landed safely despite the violent turbulence brought on by the impending tropical storm.*

In this case, the important information is placed first, so the reader is unlikely to miss the key point.

3. Varying Sentence Openers

When you first learned to write, all of your sentences began with the subject first. Now that you are more advanced with your writing, one of the most important aspects of creating compelling prose is varying your sentence patterns. This means varying how you start your sentences. There are three simple ways to do so:

- a. Using transitions or adverbs:
 - ♦ on the other hand, in spite of, on the contrary, eventually, rarely
- b. Using dependent clauses. A dependent clause is a phrase that adds information to a sentence but cannot stand alone. In other words, it is a fragment of information.

- ♦ Because she valued the feel of a small community, she chose to attend a modestly sized liberal arts school in a quiet New England town.
 - ♦ While her newborn slept soundly in the nursery, she rushed about to complete as many chores and phone-calls as she could.
- c. Using phrases:
- ♦ Prepositional: A prepositional phrase is a phrase that consists of a preposition and its object.
 - » Around town, he was known as everybody’s friend.
 - » In the winter, her favorite activity was skiing.
 - ♦ Verbal: A verbal phrase is a group of words including a verb and its complements, objects, or other modifiers. In other words, it is a phrase that includes a verb and the words that are working with the verb.
 - ♦ Relaxing after his team’s hard-fought victory, James kicked his feet up on the coffee table and promptly fell asleep.
 - ♦ To celebrate her acceptance into law school, she treated her whole family to an extravagant dinner.

Trying it Out

If you are revising a draft, scan your writing and select a paragraph that might benefit from some more variety in its sentences. Use the methods listed below to guide your revision work. Remember, you may not need to edit every single sentence—the goal is variety and rhythm.

If you have not yet written your draft, briefly plan out one of your body paragraphs. Identify a clear topic or subclaim, as well as some pieces of evidence that help support this part of your writing. Then, take the next several minutes to write out this body paragraph, practicing the methods listed below to add variety and rhythm.

- a. Use sentences of different lengths.
- b. Try rearranging the order of some sentences—will the main information of the sentence come at the beginning or the end of the sentence?

- c. Use a variety of sentence openers. Not every sentence needs a flashy beginning, but try using one or two.

Share your work with an editing partner, if possible, and exchange feedback. Make further edits based on your partner's recommendations.

What type of edits do you seem to be making the most frequently here? Is this because you are more comfortable making that type of revision, or was your writing significantly lacking in that area? Keep these issues in mind as you move forward with your writing.

Writing It Up

If you are still in the early stages of drafting, experiment with your sentences. Remember your options:

- Editing sentence length
- Rearranging a sentence
- Editing sentence openers

Use a variety of approaches in your writing.

If you are revising, compare your revised paragraph to some of the other paragraphs in your essay. Which other sections would benefit from some editing for variety? Consider rewriting paragraphs by changing the length and syntax of your sentences and how you start them off.