Sentence Variety

Sentence variety gives spice to your paper. By using a healthy combination of long and short sentences, your writing can become more approachable, professional, and readable. Sometimes, all you need to do is combine repetitive sentences, or perhaps separate longer thoughts into shorter sentences. By varying the length of your sentences, the overall flow of your writing will improve.

Combining Short Sentences

Having too many short sentences in your writing can make it read very simplistically. Suddenly, complicated ideas read as if they appear in a children’s book. For example:

Maria studied carefully for her test. Maria prepared dinner for her family. Maria went to bed early.

Do you see how broken up these three sentences read? To make this sound more compelling, we can combine the sentences in a variety of ways.

Listing

Because each sentence begins with “Maria,” and no one else is mentioned in those sentences, we can omit the word for the other two sentences and condense it into a list. The three sentences then become one:

Maria studied carefully for her test, prepared dinner for her family, and went to bed early.

Word Choice

Sometimes, adding a word here and there can help replace the same repetitive information. By adding some contextualizing words, the previous example can become:

Maria studied carefully for her test before she prepared dinner for her family, and later went to bed early.

Clause Order

All sentences are composed of clauses. There are two kinds of clauses, independent and dependent.

Independent Clause
- Complete thought or idea
- A subject and a verb

Example:
Maria studied carefully for her test.

Dependent Clause
- Incomplete thought or idea
- Cannot stand alone, is dependent on an independent clause

Example:
Before preparing dinner for her family . . .

By using a combination of independent and dependent clauses, your sentences can seem more complex and fluid: Before preparing dinner for her family, Maria studied carefully for her test, and later went to bed early.
Dividing Long Sentences

Just as combining short sentences can make your writing go from sounding choppy to having a good flow, dividing long sentences can help ensure that you and your reader do not get lost in a jumble of words.

Example:
Before preparing dinner for her family, Maria studied carefully for the test that she would have next Friday morning, and later she went to bed early so that she could have a good sleep.

Though there is nothing grammatically wrong with this sentence, it is a lot to read and take in. And if a whole paper is written with long, sweeping sentences like the one above, it will be too unapproachable for your reader. The quickest solution is to divide the sentence into separate clauses and then break them down into their own sentences.

Here is that sentence again, broken down into dependent and independent clauses:

Before preparing dinner for her family, Maria studied carefully for the test that she would have next Friday morning and later she went to bed early so that she could have a good sleep.

In this long sentence, we have two dependent clauses and two independent clauses. Because of the conjunction “and” we can easily break the sentence down into two. So the long sentence becomes:

Before preparing dinner for her family, Maria studied carefully for the test that she would have next Friday morning. Later, she went to bed early so that she could have a good sleep.

By breaking the sentence up into two, you eliminate the possibility that your reader will get lost trying to figure out what the sentence is actually saying.

Using Conjunctions and Other Connecting Words

As demonstrated above, conjunctions can help you easily and clearly present related or contrasting information. The common conjunctions are known as the acronym FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so). Although those are the most popular, there are many other words you could use instead that could help you combine ideas:

The words because, that, or which can help you expand on a thought. For example:

- Maria studied carefully for the test. The test is next Friday morning.
  - can become
- Maria studied carefully for the test, which is next Friday morning.
  - or
- Maria studied carefully for the test that is next Friday morning.
  - or
- Because the test is next Friday morning, Maria studied carefully.

Although there is no steadfast rule, varying your sentence length and structure can really change a dull-sounding paper into an approachable and compelling read. If you are having trouble identifying where you should add variety to your sentences, try reading out loud and really listening to the rhythm of the sentences rather than for their content. Writing should sound like music. It should have long, flowing moments as well as sharp and succinct moments. The same structure over and over again can become dull and your words may lose their impact.