



Sentence variety

Clauses

The basis for English sentence structure is the **clause**. An **independent** clause is one that can stand on its own as a sentence. Such a clause consists of at least one subject noun and a verb, an action the subject is performing.

Ex. Students learn.
noun verb

Independent clauses can include other material – prepositional phrases, object nouns, modifying words or phrases, etc. – but at the heart always include an actor and an action.

Ex. The students of Grinnell College learn a great deal about how to write essays.
noun (actor) verb (action)

Similarly, a **dependent** clause includes a noun and a verb but adds a word that precludes the clause standing alone as a sentence.

Ex. While students learn.
Sub. conj.+ noun + verb

The subordinate conjunction “while” makes this clause dependent or subordinate and thus a “sentence fragment.” To correct the error, add an independent clause.

Ex. While students learn, they eat junk food.
Sub.conj. + noun + verb (COMMA) + noun + verb + object noun

Subordination and Coordination

If you are prone to creating short, choppy sentences, you might combine thoughts using either coordination or subordination to add variety and smooth transitions between your thoughts.¹

Subordination combines phrases and/or clauses of unequal weight into sentences that show the relative importance of the “facts.” Use different subordinating conjunctions² to emphasize the relationship these facts have, and remember that the clause beginning with one of these subordinating conjunctions is a dependent clause and cannot stand alone:

¹ See “Transitional Devices” in the College Writing 100 course packet.

² For more on conjunctions and relative clauses, see Dobbs’ syntactic analysis reprinted in the CW 100 course packet.

Causal relationship: (*after, *as, *before, because, if, in order that, *since, so that, unless)

Ex. I changed my thesis statement **because** I could not find enough support for it in the readings.
independent clause (NO COMMA) + subordinating conjunction + dependent clause

Oppositional relationship, or one of degree: (although, than, though, while)

Ex. **Although** I changed my thesis to fit my arguments, I was not happy with the final paper.
subordinating conjunction + dependent clause (COMMA) + independent clause

Time relationship: (*after, *as, *before, *(ever) since, *until, when, where, while)

Ex. **Before** I handed in the final draft, I read it aloud and backwards, sentence by sentence.
subordinating conjunction + dependent clause (COMMA) + independent clause

Relative clauses: (that, which, who, whom, whose)**

Ex. The paper **that** I changed **because** I needed more support for my thesis earned a B+.
noun [subord.conj. +relative clause + subord. conj.+dependent clause] + verb of indep. clause.

Coordination combines phrases or independent clauses, that have roughly equal importance using one of the coordinating conjunctions – *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so* (**fanboys**).

Phrases:

Ex: The phoenix is a legendary creature. The Minotaur is also a legendary creature.
The phoenix **and** the Minotaur are legendary creatures.
(Compound subject noun)

Ex. When the phoenix bursts into flames, it dies. It is then reborn from the ashes.
When the phoenix bursts into flames, it dies **but** is reborn from the ashes.
(Compound verb, NO COMMA before the coordinating conjunction “but”)

Independent Clauses:

Ex: King Minos held the Minotaur in abomination. The king built a labyrinth in which to imprison the monster.
King Minos held the Minotaur in abomination, **so** he built a labyrinth in which to imprison the monster.
(Independent clause (COMMA) + coordinating conjunction + independent clause)

Parallelism combines 3 or more words, phrases, or clauses that have roughly equal importance in a sentence using similar structures and coordinating conjunctions.

* These words may also work as prepositions.

- Ex. He **eats, studies, and dreams** new food combinations.
(1 actor, 3 actions, 1 object)
- Ex. The cookbook author **combines** food in new ways, **evaluates** the success of his combinations, **and writes** a weekly food column for the local paper.
(3 verb phrases)
- Ex. In dividing up our responsibilities, my husband concentrates on the main entrée items, ensuring that they are made using as much locally-grown food as possible; I focus on desserts, making sure that we have at least one VEGAN or “special diet sensitive” option available every day; finally, we both avoid the paperwork, ensuring that we end up with several sleepless nights at tax time.
(3 independent clauses followed by 3 participles and 3 relative clauses)

Sentence structures

A sentence in its simplest form is an independent clause, which consists of a subject noun and a predicate verb – that is, an actor and an action. You could write a grammatical essay using only simple sentences, but the result would inevitably be choppy, repetitious, and boring.

You can add interest to your prose by varying types of sentences you use in an essay. Including the simple sentence, there are four basic classifications of sentences depending on the number of **independent** and **dependent** clauses you include.

Simple sentence (one independent clause, no dependent clauses)

- Ex. Flamingos eat algae.
independent clause

Compound sentence (two or more independent clauses, no dependent clauses)

- Ex. Flamingos eat algae, and they stand on one leg.
independent clause independent clause

Complex sentence (one independent clause, one or more dependent clauses)

- Ex. While they eat algae, flamingos stand on two legs.
dependent clause independent clause

Compound, complex sentence (two or more independent clauses, one or more dependent clauses)

- Ex. While they eat algae, flamingos stand on two legs, but they stand on one leg at other times.
Dependent clause independent clause independent clause

Exercises in Sentence Combination

Below are several series of simple sentences about cancer. Many of the sentences were adapted from Robert A. Weinberg's book *One Renegade Cell*. When properly arranged, the sentences make logical paragraphs.

A. This group of sentences is already in an order that will make a model paragraph: Try putting the first 2 or 3 sentences together to make either 1 compound (with a coordinating conjunction) or 1 compound, complex (add a subordinating conjunction) sentence. Group the remaining sentences into twos or threes and do the same with them. Maybe you want to keep one sentence (such as #3) as a simple sentence, just for variety.

1. Cancer is not a single disease.
2. Cancer is a set of diseases.
3. A common element in all kinds of cancer is the apparently uncontrolled growth of a particular set of cells.
4. The uncontrolled growth of skin cells results in melanoma, or skin cancer.
5. A jumble of lung cells grows into a lung tumor.
6. Lung tumors are diagnosed as lung cancer.
7. Breast cancer is the term for several different kinds of tumors in breast tissue.

Would a transition or two make this a better paragraph?

B. Look at the following sentences: Notice how #2, 3 and 4 all refer to how quickly tumors grow, #5 & 6 compare the body to a machine, and #7, 8, 9, & 10 discuss parts of the body in relation to tumors. How many different ways can you put these groups of sentences together?

1. Cancer wreaks havoc in almost every part of the human body.
2. These tumors expand quickly.
3. Other tumors are more aggressive.
4. Some tumors grow slowly.
5. A body is a perfect, marvelously beautiful, and immeasurably complex machine.
6. Cancer brings an unwelcome change to a biological machine.
7. Tumors affect muscles and bones.
8. A tumor's presence in human tissues signals chaos.
9. Tumors strike the brain and the sex organs.
10. A tumor's appearance in human tissue heralds a breakdown of normal function.

If the first sentence is as follows, how would you reconfigure your combined sentences above into a logical paragraph? If some transitions would help, write them in.

*Cancer wreaks havoc in almost every part of the human body.*_____

C. With the following sentences, combine 1 with 2 and 4 with 8, in both cases using a subordinating conjunction to show a causal relationship. Then add #3 to either combo with a coordinating conjunction. Can you name a relationship between 5 & 6 by putting them together? Does the relationship change a little depending upon the coordinating or subordinating conjunction you use? The subjects of 7, 8, & 9 could all be the same. Can you use parallelism to put these together?

1. Tumors look like invaders.
2. Tumors take on the appearance of alien life forms.
3. Invaders enter the body through stealth.
4. Tumors are not invaders.
- 5 The body uses human cells to form its own tissue.
6. Tumors use human cells to form their jumbled masses.
7. The jumbles disrupt biological order and function.
8. Tumors/The jumbles begin their programs of destruction from within.
9. Tumors/The jumbles can bring down the entire, complex, life-sustaining edifice of the human body.

Try putting your varied sentences into a logical paragraph. There is no right or wrong way to do this, but you may want to discuss your organization with your WL instructor. Again, you may use transitions to improve the internal coherence of your paragraph, regardless of how you string the parts together.
