

OWLS Writing Guides:

SENTENCE COMBINING & VARIETY



Good prose uses a variety of sentence types—simple, compound, and complex. Writing a series of ‘simple’ (subject-predicate) sentences makes writing sound choppy and monotonous. Just as important, heavy reliance on simple sentences doesn’t allow you to show logical relationships between ideas. You can improve your style and clarify the logic of your writing by using these techniques for sentence combining and sentence variety.

Combine sentences using coordination when the ideas are equally important (creating a compound sentence):

--Use a **coordinating conjunction and comma**. The coordination conjunctions are *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*.

My friend is coming to town for the weekend. I’m excited to see him.
My friend is coming to town for the weekend, and I’m excited to see him.

--Use a **semicolon alone or with a transitional word called a conjunctive adverb**. Some commonly used conjunctive adverbs are *afterwards, as a result, consequently, however, in addition, instead, then, therefore*.

My computer crashed. I lost all of my files.
My computer crashed; I lost all of my files.
My computer crashed; consequently, I lost all of my files.

Combine sentences using subordination when one idea is less important than the other (creating a complex sentence).

--Turn one sentence into an **adverb clause**. An adverb clause is a type of dependent clause that describes when (*when, as soon as, as, after, before, until, while*), why (*because, since*), or where (*where, wherever*) in a sentence, or it expresses contrast/concession (*whereas, although, even though*), or conditions (*if, unless*).

I had a terrible cold. I decided to go to work anyway.
Although I had a terrible cold, I decided to go to work anyway.

--Turn one sentence into an **adjective clause (relative clause)**. An adjective clause is a type of dependent clause that modifies a noun in the main sentence and begins with one of the relative pronouns (*that, which, who, whom*).

Margo is a single mother. She has a hard time paying her bills.
Margo, who is a single mother, has a hard time paying her bills.

Use an appositive (a word or phrase that renames or helps identify the noun or pronoun close by) to express one of the ideas.

Margo is a single mother of three. She has a hard time paying her bills.
A single mother, Margo has a hard time paying her bills.

Use a verb phrase to express one of the ideas.

--Use an *-ing* verb phrase (present participle form):

Jonah did well in the high jump. He came in second.
Coming in second, Jonah did well in the high jump.

--Use an *-ed* verb phrase (past participle form):

Sam won the election easily. He is noted for his honesty.
Noted for his honesty, Sam won the election easily.

--Use a *to* verb phrase (infinitive form):

Leah needs to take summer classes. She wants to graduate in December.
To graduate in December, Leah needs to take summer classes.

--Use a prepositional phrase (a phrase that begins with a preposition and ends with a noun or pronoun):

The campers built a fire. They built it near the stream.
The campers built a fire near the stream.
Near the stream, the campers built a fire.