Writing Strong Sentences

The good news is that you don’t have to know a lot of grammar rules to be able to write clear and effective sentences. You just need to think carefully about how to express your ideas so your reader understands and is interested in your meaning.

**Writing Complete Sentences**

Some of the common mistakes in sentence writing are **fragments, comma splices, run-ons,** and **rambling sentences.**

**Fragment:** a group of words used as a sentence that isn’t a complete sentence. A sentence must have a subject and a verb.

Ex.: Fragment: The dog’s bowl empty.

Sentence: The dog’s bowl was empty.

Fragment: After the dog’s bowl was empty.

Sentence: After the dog drank, the bowl was empty.

*Note: Fragments can be used in dialogue, since that’s often how people really talk.*

**Comma Splice:** two independent clauses are connected with a comma. The comma is not enough: a period, semicolon or conjunction is necessary.

Ex.: Splice: The dog had been very thirsty, she drank all the water in her bowl.

Sentence: The dog had been very thirsty, so she drank all the water in her bowl.

**Rambling:** a sentence that goes on too long, usually a result of using too many *and*s, *but*s or *so*s.

Ex.: Rambling: The dog was out in the sun for a long time and was panting and was very thirsty so when I got her some water she drank it all.

Sentence: The dog was out in the sun for a long time. She was panting and was very thirsty, so when I got her some water she drank it all.

**Run-on Sentence:** Two complete sentences joined without correct punctuation or a connecting word.

Ex. Run-on: The dog took a long nap she was so tired.

Sentence: The dog took a long nap because she was so tired. *Or* The dog took a long nap. She was very tired.

**Sentence Variety**

When reading a long essay or story, it can be boring if all the sentences sound similar in length, structure, and word choice. As a writer, your job is to interest your readers in your topic. This begins with your sentences. Most sentences include a few simple ideas that work together to form a complete thought.

If your sentences are mostly **short and simple**: combine them!

* Connect them by making **a series** of similar ideas in sequence
* Use a **relative pronoun** (who, whose, that, which) to show how the less important (subordinate) ideas relate to the more important ones
* Use an **introductory phrase** (because, when)
* Use a **semicolon** to connect two closely related sentences

**Writing Clearly**

In order for your readers to understand your writing, it has to be specific and clear. You may know what you mean, but can your reader follow your ideas? Are they presented logically? This is important on the sentence level as well as the paragraph level.

Some examples of common errors that will confuse your readers:

**Incomplete comparison:** leaving out a word or words that show what’s being compared to what

Ex.: Incomplete: My dog is cuter.

Clear: My dog is cuter than all the other dogs at the dog park today.

**Indefinite reference:** use of pronouns makes it unclear which one writer is referring to

Ex.: Indefinite: The dog trainer taught the dog a new trick. She was very proud of herself. (Who was proud – the trainer or the dog?)

**Misplaced modifiers:** modifier (descriptor) is placed incorrectly so it seems to refer to the wrong object

Ex.: Misplaced: We have a leash for our dog which can extend to be very long. (What can extend – the leash or the dog?)

**Dangling modifiers:** modifier that doesn’t relate correctly to the words in the sentence

Ex.: Trying desperately to jump up to catch a chipmunk in the tree, I finally pulled my dog away. (This makes it sound as though I’m jumping, but it’s the dog that’s jumping, and I’m pulling her away.)

**Avoid Over-Writing**

Strong writing is natural and to the point, without fluff that may distract from our ideas. This doesn’t mean it has to be plain and dull; a large and varied vocabulary and sentence variety will help you express yourself in the most engaging and powerful way. However, it’s important to avoid over-writing. Here are some common pitfalls:

**Deadwood:** phrases that sound formal or important but don’t add anything to your meaning

Ex.: At this point in time…, it is undoubtedly so that…, etc.

**Flowery language:** overuse of adjectives and/or adverbs; reliance on fancy, long words when a simpler, more direct style would do the job

Ex.: Flowery: My faithful canine companion gazed up at me with misty, glowing eyes, revealing the love she cannot express verbally.

Concise: My loving dog’s eyes showed her silent devotion.

**Also avoid:**

* **Clichés –** overused word or phrase that gives no new insight on the topic
* **Trite expressions –** overused, stale saying that sounds insincere or unnatural
* **Jargon –** technical or subject-specific words that don’t sound natural (it’s ok to use terms in non-fiction writing, if you define them)

**Standard Written English**

Sometimes in everyday life we speak in a language that is different from the Standard English that is acceptable in writing. When you write for school assignments or other more formal situations, such as giving a speech, debating, writing a piece of fiction for possible publication, applying for a summer job or writing an email to a teacher, the expectation is to use the rules of Standard Written English. Your reader is less likely to take your writing seriously if it is “colloquial,” “slang” or like a “text” you’d send a friend.

**Double negative:** a sentence that contains two negative words. Two negatives = positive, so this can have unintended consequences for the meaning.

Ex.: The dog doesn’t have no toys.

Correct: The dog doesn’t have any toys. *Or* The dog has no toys.

**Shift in construction – subject/verb agreement:** the number, tense, person and voice has to remain consistent

Ex. Shift in number: When *the dog* goes out for a walk, *they* get very excited. (Single; plural)

Shift in tense: When the dog goes out for a walk, she got very excited. (Present; past)

Shift in person: When *one* walks a dog in New York City, *you* have to bring a bag to pick up after it. (impersonal; personal)

Shift in voice: *If you want to find* a wonderful pet, adoption sites for rescued animals *should be browsed*. (Active; passive)

**Inconsistent construction:** Ex.:My dog’s favorite activities are *running, sleeping*, *to meet* new dogs on walks, and *getting* brushed. (Verbs change from –ing to “to meet” and back again)