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student writing support **QUICKTIPS**

CHOPPY SENTENCES

Problem

Too many short simple sentences can make your writing appear unsophisticated and your ideas seem disconnected.

This impression can also be caused by too many sentences in a row that begin with a simple subject. (Notice repeated subjects beginning the choppy examples below, e.g., *She* took, *She* had, *She*...)

Solutions

SHOW LOGICAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN IDEAS by using words that show cause and effect such as *because*, *since*, and *so*, and words that show contrast such as *but*, *yet* and *although*.

Choppy:

She took dance classes. She had no natural grace or sense of rhythm. She eventually gave up the idea of becoming a dancer.

Revised:

She took dance classes, **but** she had no natural grace or sense of rhythm, **so** she eventually gave up the idea of becoming a dancer.

JOIN MULTIPLE ACTIONS BY THE SAME AGENT INTO ONE SENTENCE by using subordination (phrases beginning with *if, when, after, as*, etc.) and coordination (sentences and phrases joined by conjunctions like *and, but, so*, etc.).

Choppy:

Bears emerge from hibernation in the spring. They wander through wetlands. They feed mainly on grasses.

Revised:

When bears emerge from hibernation in the spring, they wander through wetlands **and** feed mainly on grasses.

USE APPOSITIVES (phrases that add information about a noun).

Choppy:

Jesse Ventura has denied an interest in running for the senate. Ventura is the former governor of Minnesota.

Revised:

Jesse Ventura, **the former governor of Minnesota**, has denied an interest in running for the senate.

INTEGRATE MINOR DETAILS. You don't need a new sentence for each piece of information.

Choppy:

The boy asked his father a question. The boy is five years old. The question was about death.

Revised:

The five-year-old boy asked his father a question about death.

LEARN TO USE MODIFYING PHRASES EFFECTIVELY (phrases built around an adjective or the participial form of a verb: often *-ing* or *-ed/-en*).

Choppy:

My aunt is very strict with my cousin. She expects her to study all the time.

Revised:

My aunt is very strict with my cousin, **expecting** her to study all the time.

Choppy:

I was exhausted. I stared at the page. I was unable to comprehend a single word.

Revised:

Exhausted, I stared at the page, **unable** to comprehend a single word.

NOTE: A modifying phrase must describe a word in the sentence. If it does not, you have what's called a "dangling modifier," e.g., Exhausted, the page was incomprehensible. (Who is exhausted? Not the page! But the tired person is not part of the sentence. In this example, the word "exhausted" is the dangling modifier.)

TRY STARTING YOUR SENTENCES IN DIFFERENT WAYS, with a simple subject, a prepositional phrase, a dependent clause, a modifying phrase, etc.

The project was launched last month. With little fanfare, the project was launched... Once funding was secured, the project was launched... Dubbed a pork barrel by the media, the project was launched...

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- Don't string together too many clauses—usually no more than three.
- Vary the length of your sentences. Too many long sentences in a row can be just as monotonous as too many short sentences. A short sentence can have great impact if well placed.

For more information:

Miles, Robert, Marc Bertonasco, and William Karns. *Prose Style: A Contemporary Guide*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991. Print.

Williams, Joseph. "Cohesion and Coherence." *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace.* 10th ed. Boston: Longman, 2010. Print. 66–81.