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Chapter 16

Sentence Style

Why Sentence Style Matters

Imagine a world where all music was in a single monotone, all paintings were the same shade of green, and all dancing consisted of one slow dance step. Writing with only one kind of sentence style would fit nicely into that world. In truth, music, art, and dance gain much beauty and interest from wide variation. You, as a writer, also have the option to vary your sentence style strategically. This chapter will help you vary sentence lengths and styles and choose when to write in active and passive voice. You will also learn how to use subordination, coordination, and parallelism to achieve emphasis and balance, how to control for sexist and offensive language, and how to manage the mood of the verbs in your writing.

16.1 Using Varied Sentence Lengths and Styles

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the value of varied sentence lengths within a body of text.
2. Use a variety of sentence beginnings and endings.
3. Recognize different sentence styles.

Text written with only one type of sentence is boring for readers. To make your texts more interesting, you should use sentences of varying lengths, with different openings and endings, and with a variety of structures.

Featuring Short Sentences

Short sentences, when not overused, can be used to emphasize an idea and catch a reader's attention. Notice how the ideas expressed through the following short sentences grab your attention more than the same ideas do when embedded in longer sentences.

Ideas separated into shorter sentences: My mother wants me to spend next weekend with her and my two aunts. They all talk nonstop. I am sure I would be nothing more than a fly on the wall while they talk about all the family members. I am simply not going!

Ideas embedded in longer sentences: My mother wants me to spend next weekend with her and my two aunts who all talk nonstop. I am sure I would be nothing more than a fly on the wall while they talk about all the family members, so I am simply not going!

But you need to be careful to choose your short sentences strategically so that they carry emphasis without making your writing appear unsophisticated. A third option might be to use one longer sentence and break up the other one into two shorter sentences.

Combining Short Sentences

Since an abundance of short sentences will give a simplistic appearance to your writing, you don't want to use an excessive number of them close together. You can

combine short sentences as a means of explaining an idea or a connection between two ideas. When you combine two complete sentences, you have to choose to either subordinate one of the ideas to the other or coordinate the two ideas by giving them equal weight. Your choice should always reflect the intended emphasis and **causality**¹ of the two initial sentences.

Example

Two short sentences: My television is broken. It is Karen's fault.

Sentence combination that maintains intended emphasis and causality:
Because of Karen, my television is broken.

Incorporating Sentences of Varying Lengths

Text of varying lengths is easier to read than text where the sentences are all about the same length. A whole page of extremely long sentences is overwhelming. Try reading a high-level academic paper on a scientific topic. The sentences are often long and involved, which results in difficult reading. A whole page of very short sentences, on the other hand, is choppy and seems unsophisticated.

Consider the following text that begins the first chapter of Mark Twain's *A Tramp Abroad*. Twain begins with a long sentence (thirty-three words), follows with a medium-length sentence (seventeen words), and closes with two short sentences (six and five words, respectively). This mix of sentence lengths creates text that flows smoothly and is easy to read.

One day it occurred to me that it had been many years since the world had been afforded the spectacle of a man adventurous enough to undertake a journey through Europe on foot. After much thought, I decided that I was a person fitted to furnish to mankind this spectacle. So I determined to do it. This was in March, 1878.

Now read a different version of the same paragraph. Notice how the short sentences sound choppy and juvenile.

I was thinking one day. I thought of something the world hadn't seen lately. My thought was of an adventurous man. The man was on a walking trip through

1. The relationship between the cause of an action and its effect (e.g., "The food spoiled because I left the freezer door open last night").

Europe. I thought some more. Then I decided that I should take such a trip. I should give the world something to watch. So I determined to do it. This was in March 1878.

Here's another version of the same paragraph written in one long and rather overwhelming sentence.

One day it occurred to me that it had been many years since the world had been afforded the spectacle of a man adventurous enough to undertake a journey through Europe on foot, so after much thought, I decided that I was a person fitted to furnish to mankind this spectacle, and it was in March 1878 that I decided I was determined to do it.

Diversifying Your Sentence Openers and Endings

Like making all your sentences the same length, starting all your sentences in the same format—say, with “the” or “there”—could result in seriously boring text. Even if you vary your openings slightly but still follow the basic subject–verb–object format every time, you're missing an opportunity to make your sentences more interesting. Study how the following **techniques** for varying the **sentence openers**² add interest.

Example 1

All sentences begin with one or two words:

Original: The girl was terribly upset when her purse was stolen. There wasn't anything that could get the image out of her mind. The thief was running when he grabbed her purse. The girl didn't see him coming and was caught off guard. The girl fell down and never got a good look at him.

Revision: [Reverse the sentence.] Having her purse stolen upset the girl terribly. [Start with the key issue.] Her mind held onto the image and would not let it go. [Add an adverb.] Unfortunately, she didn't see him coming and was so caught off guard that she fell down and never got a good look at him.

2. The first word of a sentence or the grammatical format with which a sentence begins.

Example 2

Sentences begin with a variety of words but all follow the subject–verb–object format:

Original: The young woman got up off the ground. Then she ran to her dorm room in a state of shock. She got in the elevator without looking at anyone. She started crying as soon as she walked into her room. Her roommate held her hand and tried to get her to calm down. Some friends from down the hall showed up.

Revision: The young woman got up off the ground. [**Rearrange to create an introductory phrase.**] In a state of shock, she ran to her dorm room. [**Insert an adjective at the beginning.**] Frightened, she got in the elevator without looking at anyone. [**Choose an unusual subject for the sentence.**] Tears came as soon as she walked into her room. [**Rearrange to create an introductory phrase.**] In an effort to calm her down, her roommate held her hand. [**Add some new content at the beginning of the sentence.**] As timing would have it, some friends from down the hall showed up.

By placing a key word or phrase at the end of a sentence, you can also hold readers' attention as they wait for the full meaning to unfold. This approach of building to a climax places added emphasis on an idea.

Example 1

The old battle-ax looked like she was about to start yelling at everybody, so I held my breath right up until the moment she broke into a wide grin.

Example 2

The whole family gathered around the computer waiting for my sister to say the words we'd been waiting to hear for fifteen months—that she was coming home.

Including Sentences with Differing Structures

Just as you need to use a variety of sentence openers to keep text interesting, you should vary your sentence structure. The types of clauses you use are key factors in varying your sentence structure. Look at the following table for an overview.

Table 16.1 Varying Sentence Types Based on Clauses

Sentence Type	Number and Type of Clauses	Example [Independent Clauses Underlined, Dependent Clauses in Bold]
Simple sentence	One independent clause	Ted threw the bat.
Compound sentence	Two independent clauses	Ted threw the bat, and it hit the umpire.
Complex sentence	One independent clause <i>and</i> one or more dependent clauses	While wincing in pain , the umpire ejected Ted, causing the manager to protest .
Compound-complex sentence	At least two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause	Losing control of his emotions , Ted threw the ball, and it nearly hit the umpire too.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Using a variety of sentence lengths helps make text interesting.
- Varying your sentence beginnings helps keep texts from being too monotonous.
- Using a mix of sentence structures makes text more inviting and engaging.
- You can use short sentences to create emphasis.
- You can add emphasis by placing key words and terms at the ends of sentences and as the last word in a series.
- You can also add emphasis to a sentence with paired ideas by strategically aligning words with the ideas.

EXERCISES

1. Write a series of three sentences that include two longer sentences and a shorter sentence used for emphasis. Vary the placement of the shorter sentence in the sequence and consider the effect on the sentence.
2. Combine the following two sentences into one sentence where the relationship between the two ideas is emphasized:

In size, Idaho is the fourteenth-largest state in the United States.

In population, Idaho ranks thirty-ninth in the United States.

3. Write a sentence with a series where the last item in the series is the most impressive or startling.
4. Compare “hourly workers” and “salary workers” in a sentence using either like words or paired words to emphasize the two ideas.
5. Write a paragraph about a childhood memory. Include about one-third short sentences (seven or fewer words), one-third medium sentences (between twelve and twenty-four words), and one-third long sentences (more than twenty-five words). Include at least ten sentences. After each sentence, include the number of words in parentheses.
6. Write a paragraph about something you have done during the last couple of weeks. Do not use more than two sentences with the same format or opening phrasing. Include at least eight sentences.
7. Write a paragraph about your family. From [Table 16.1 "Varying Sentence Types Based on Clauses"](#), use each of the four sentence types at least once. After the paragraph, include a chart showing each of the sentence types and your matching usage.

16.2 Writing in Active Voice and Uses of Passive Voice

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Differentiate between active and passive voice.
2. Write in active voice.
3. Know when and how to use passive voice.

Sydney J. Harris, a Chicago journalist, said, “We have not passed that subtle line between childhood and adulthood until we move from the passive voice to the active voice—that is, until we have stopped saying, ‘It got lost,’ and say, ‘I lost it.’” Besides being a rite of passage in human development, routinely using active voice also marks growth in your writing ability.

As a college writer, you need to know when and how to use both active and passive voice. Although **active voice**³ is the standard preferred writing style, **passive voice**⁴ is acceptable, and even preferred, in certain situations. However, as a general rule, passive voice tends to be awkward, vague, and wordy.

Recognizing Active and Passive Voice

Lack of awareness or understanding of passive voice may cause you to use it regularly. Once you fully grasp how it differs from active voice, passive voice will begin to stand out. You will then recognize it when you use it as well as when others use it.

To use active voice, you should make the noun that performs the action the subject of the sentence and pair it directly with an action verb.

Read these two sentences:

Matt Damon left Harvard in the late 1980s to start his acting career.

Matt Damon’s acting **career was started** in the late 1980s when he left Harvard.

In the first sentence, “left” is an action verb that is paired with the subject, “Matt Damon.” If you ask yourself “Who or what left?” the answer is “Matt Damon.”

3. A sentence in which the subject is doing the action (e.g., “James ate the donut”).

4. A sentence in which the subject is receiving the action (e.g., “The donut was eaten by James”).

Neither of the other two nouns in the sentence—“Harvard” and “career”—left anything.

Now look at the second sentence. The action verb is “started.” If you ask yourself “Who or what started something?” the answer is again “Matt Damon.” But in this sentence, “career” has been placed in the subject position, not “Matt Damon.” When the doer of the action is not in the subject position, the sentence is in passive voice. In passive voice constructions, the doer of the action usually follows the word “by” as the indirect object of a prepositional phrase, and the action verb is typically partnered with a version of the verb “to be.”

Look at the following two passive voice sentences. For each sentence, note the **noun** in the subject position, the form of the verb “**to be**,” the **action verb**, and the **doer** of the action.

Example 1

The original **screenplay** for *Good Will Hunting* **was written** by **Matt Damon** for an English class when he was a student at Harvard University.

Example 2

As an actor, **Matt Damon is loved** by millions of **fans** worldwide.

Put the following four sentences to the test in order to determine the voice of each: Is the doer in the subject position paired with an action verb (active voice) or placed as an indirect object of a prepositional phrase after a version of the verb “to be” (passive voice) and a verb in past perfect tense?

1. **Matt Damon and Ben Affleck grew up** together and are still colleagues and friends today. (active)
2. An Oscar **was given** to **Matt Damon and Ben Affleck** for the *Good Will Hunting* script. (passive)

3. Jason Bourne, a character from the novels of Robert Ludlum, **was played** several times by **Matt Damon**. (passive)
4. Besides acting in the *Bourne* movies, **Matt** also **played** the title character in *Good Will Hunting*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. (active)

Using Action Verbs to Make Sentences More Interesting

Two sentences can generally say the same thing but leave an entirely different impression based on the verb choices. For example, which of the following sentences gives you the most vivid mental picture?

A bald eagle was overhead and now is low in the sky near me.

OR

A bald eagle soared overhead and then dove low, seemingly coming right at me.

As a rule, try to express yourself with action verbs instead of forms of the verb “to be.” Sometimes it is fine to use forms of the verb “to be,” such as “is” or “are,” but it is easy to overuse them (as in this sentence—twice). Overuse of such verbs results in dull writing.

Read each of the following sentences and note the use of the verb “to be.” In your head, think of a way to reword the sentence to make it more interesting by using an action verb. Then look at how each revision uses one or more *action verbs*.

Examples

Original: A photo **was** snapped, the tiger **was** upset, and Elizabeth **was** on the ground.

Revision: Elizabeth innocently *snapped* the photo and the lion *let out* a roar that *sent* Elizabeth *scrambling* backward until she *fell* down.

Original: A giraffe's neck **is** long and thin, but it **is** as much as five hundred pounds in weight.

Revision: A giraffe's neck *wanders* far above its body and often *weighs* as much as five hundred pounds.

Original: An elephant **is** able to drink eighty gallons of water and **is** likely to eat one thousand pounds of vegetation in a day.

Revision: In one day, an elephant *slurps* down eighty gallons of water and *grinds* away one thousand pounds of vegetation.

You might have developed a tendency to use another rather dull and unimaginative form of passive voice, by starting sentences with “there is,” “there are,” “there were,” “it is,” or “it was.” Read each of the following examples of this kind of **passive voice construction**. In your head, think of a way to reword the sentence to make it more interesting by using an action verb. Then look at how each sentence can be revised using an *action verb*.

Examples

Original: There are thousands of butterflies in the Butterfly House.

Revision: Thousands of butterflies *flutter* around in the Butterfly House.

Original: There were four giraffes eating leaves from the trees.

Revision: Four giraffes *ripped* mouthfuls of leaves from the trees.

Using Action Verbs Alone to Avoid Passive Voice

Even though the passive voice might include an action verb, the strength of the action verb is lessened by the structure of the sentence. Also, the passive voice tends to create unnecessary wordiness. Read the following sentences and think of a way to reword each using an action verb in active voice. Then study the suggested revision in each case.

Examples

Original: The zebras were fed by the zoo workers. (eight words)

Revision: The zoo workers fed the zebras. (six words)

Original: Water was spewed in the air by the elephant. (nine words)

Revision: The elephant spewed water in the air. (seven words)

Original: The home of the hippopotamus was cleaned up and made tidy by Hank the Hippo Man. (sixteen words)

Revision: Hank the Hippo Man cleaned up and tidied the hippopotamus's home. (eleven words)

Writing in the Active Voice

Once you completely understand the difference between active and passive voice, writing in active voice becomes easy. All you have to do is to make sure you always clearly say who or what did what. And if you notice you are using forms of the verb “to be” with your action verb, look closely at the reason. If you are writing in progressive tense (“Carrie is walking to my house”) or perfect progressive tense (“Melissa will have been married for four years by then”), you will need to use such helping verbs, even in active voice. (See [Chapter 15 "Sentence Building"](#), [Section 15.2 "Choosing Appropriate Verb Tenses"](#) for more information on progressive and perfect progressive tenses.)

Using Passive Voice

Sometimes passive voice actually is the best option. The point is to only use passive voice when you consciously decide to do so. Consider the following acceptable uses of passive voice.

- When you don't know who or what is responsible for the action:

Example: Our front door lock was picked.

Rationale: If you don't know who picked the lock on your front door, you can't say who did it. You could say a thief broke in, but that is an assumption. You could, theoretically, find out that the lock was picked by a family member who had forgotten to take a key.

- When you want to hide the person or thing responsible for the action, such as in a story:

Example: The basement was filled with a mysterious scraping sound.

Rationale: If you are writing a story, you might logically introduce a phenomenon without revealing the person or thing that caused it.

- When the person or thing that performed the action is not important:

Example: The park was flooded all week.

Rationale: Although you would obviously know that the rainwater flooded the park, it is not important to say so.

- When you do not want to place credit, responsibility, or blame:

Example: A mistake was made in the investigation that resulted in the wrong person being on trial.

Rationale: Even if you think you know who is responsible for a problem, you might not want to expose the person.

- When you want to maintain the impression of objectivity:

Example: It was noted that only first graders chose to eat the fruit.

Rationale: Research reports in certain academic disciplines attempt to remove the researcher from the results, to avoid saying, for example, "I noted that only first graders..."

- When you want to avoid using a gendered construction and pluralizing is not an option (see [Section 16.3 "Using Subordination and Coordination"](#) for more on nonsexist language):

Example: If the password is forgotten by the user, a security question will be asked.

Rationale: This construction avoids the need for "his or her" (as in "the user forgets **his or her** password").

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In active voice, the subject of the sentence completes the action. In passive voice, the action is performed by someone or something other than the subject of the sentence.
- As a rule, you should write using the active voice in order to make sentences more interesting.
- One way to avoid dull sentences is to avoid starting sentences with wording such as “there are,” “there was,” and “it is.”
- Using action verbs without the verb “to be” creates stronger, active voice sentences.
- Some specific situations call for the use of the passive voice.

EXERCISES

1. Pay attention to material you read over one week. From the things you read, collect at least ten examples of sentences written in passive voice. Take the sentences you collected and rewrite them in the active voice.
2. Choose one of the examples of acceptable uses of passive voice cited in this section and write a sample paragraph demonstrating that usage.
3. Rewrite each of these sentences using an action verb in active voice:
 - a. There were five guys sharing a pizza on the back patio.
 - b. Jane is at her parents' house for the weekend.
 - c. The movie was enjoyed by all of us.
 - d. It was a long night when the three of us decided to build a set of bunk beds.
 - e. The bus ride from here to Chicago is long and bumpy.

16.3 Using Subordination and Coordination

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Learn how to use subordination to include main ideas and minor ideas in the same sentence.
2. Learn how to use coordination to include two or more ideas of equal weight in a single sentence.
3. Within a single sentence, learn to keep subordinated ideas to a minimum.

Subordination⁵ and **coordination**⁶ are used to clarify the relative level of importance or the relationship between and among words, phrases, or clauses within sentences. You can use subordination to arrange sentence parts of unequal importance and coordination to convey the idea that sentence parts are of equal importance.

Subordination

Subordination allows you to convey differences in importance between details within a sentence. You can use the technique within a single sentence or to combine two or more smaller sentences. You should always present the most important idea in an **independent clause**⁷ and use dependent clauses and phrases to present the less important ideas. Start each **dependent clause**⁸ with a **subordinating conjunction**⁹ (e.g., *after, because, by the time, even though, if, just in case, now that, once, only if, since, though, unless, until, when, whether, while*) or a **relative pronoun**¹⁰ (e.g., *that, what, whatever, which, whichever, who, whoever, whom, whomever, whose*). These starters signal the reader that the idea is subordinate. Here's a sentence that uses a relative pronoun to convey subordination:

- I will come to your house or meet you at the gym, **whichever** works best for you.

The core idea is that I will either come to your house or meet you at the gym. The fact that you'll choose whichever option works best for you is subordinate, set apart with the relative pronoun "whichever."

5. Placement of less important ideas within a sentence in a way that makes it clear that the ideas are less important than other ideas in the sentence.
6. Placement of two or more ideas in a sentence in a way that clarifies that the ideas are of equal importance within the sentence.
7. A part of a sentence that includes both a noun and a verb and could form a stand-alone sentence.
8. A part of a sentence that presents an idea that could not stand alone as a sentence.
9. A word that introduces less important ideas in a sentence (e.g., *after, because, if*).
10. A pronoun that is singular or plural based on the pronoun's antecedent (e.g., *who, that*).

In the next example, two smaller sentences are combined using the subordinating conjunction “because”:

- Smaller sentence 1: The number of students who live at home and take online college classes has risen in the past ten years.
- Smaller sentence 2: The rise has been due to increased marketing of university online programs.
- Larger sentence using subordination (version 1): The number of students living at home and taking online college classes has risen in the past ten years **because** of increased marketing of university online programs.
- Larger sentence using subordination (version 2): **Because** of increased marketing of university online programs, the number of students living at home and taking online courses has risen in the past ten years.

Coordination

Some sentences have two or more equal ideas. You can use coordination to show a common level of importance among parts of a sentence, such as subjects, verbs, and **objects**¹¹.

Examples

Subject example: Both green beans and asparagus are great with grilled fish.

Verb example: We neither talked nor laughed during the whole two hours.

Object example: Machine embroidery combines the beauty of high-quality stitching and the expediency of modern technology.

11. A noun, noun phrase, or noun substitute that receives the action of the verb (direct object: “He ate the *apple*”) or a noun or pronoun that indicates to or for whom the action of a verb is performed (indirect object: “He gave the apple to *me*”).
12. A word that joins like-weighted ideas in a sentence (e.g., and, but, or).
13. A set of words or phrases that joins ideas of equal weight (e.g., either...or, not only...but also).

The underlined ideas within each sentence carry equal weight within their individual sentences. As examples of coordination, they can be connected with **coordinating conjunctions**¹² (*and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet*) or **correlative conjunctions**¹³ (*both...and, either...or, just as...so, neither...nor, not...but, not only...but also, whether...or*).

Controlling Emphasis

You likely use subordination and coordination automatically. For example, if you say that something happened (e.g., Dale broke his leg while sledding) because of something else (e.g., he broke his leg when he sledded into a tree), you can use separate sentences, or you can use subordination within one sentence.

Ideas presented in two sentences: Dale broke his leg while sledding this weekend. His leg broke when the sled hit a tree.

Ideas presented in one sentence using subordination: This weekend, Dale broke his leg when his sled hit a tree. [Dale broke his leg is the main idea. The fact that it happened when the sled hit a tree is the subordinated idea.]

A natural way to use coordination is, for example, to discuss two things you plan to do on vacation. You can present the two ideas in separate sentences or in one sentence using coordination to signal equal emphases.

Ideas presented in two sentences: I'm planning to see the Statue of Liberty while I'm in New York. I'm also going to go to a Broadway play.

Ideas presented in one sentence using coordination: While I'm in New York, I am planning to see the Statue of Liberty and go to a Broadway play.

Subordination Pitfalls

You will want to avoid two common subordination mistakes: placing main ideas in subordinate clauses or phrases and placing too many subordinate ideas in one sentence.

Here's an example of a sentence that subordinates the main idea:

- LoDo, a charming neighborhood featuring great art galleries, restaurants, cafés, and shops, is located in the Lower Downtown District of Denver.

The problem here is that main idea is embedded in a subordinate clause. Instead of focusing on the distinctive features of the LoDo neighborhood, the sentence makes it appear as if the main idea is the neighborhood's location in Denver. Here's a revision:

- LoDo, located in the Lower Downtown District of Denver, is a charming neighborhood featuring great art galleries, restaurants, cafés, and shops.

A sentence with too many subordinated ideas is confusing and difficult to read.

Here's an example:

- Television executives, who make the decisions about which shows to pull and which to extend, need to consider more than their individual opinions so that they do not pull another *Star Trek* mess-up where they don't recognize a great show when they see it, while balancing the need to maintain a schedule that appeals to a broad audience, considering that new types of shows don't yet have a broad following.

And here's a possible revision:

- Television executives need to consider more than their individual opinions when they decide which shows to pull and which to extend. Many years ago, some of these very executives decided that *Star Trek* should be canceled, clearly demonstrating they do not always know which shows will become great. Television executives should also balance the need to maintain a schedule that appeals to a broad audience with an appreciation for new types of shows that don't yet have a broad following.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Subordination refers to ideas in a sentence that are of less importance than the main idea. Subordinated ideas are typically connected to the rest of the sentence with a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun.
- Coordination refers to two or more ideas of equal weight in a single sentence. Coordinated ideas are usually joined to each other with coordinating conjunctions or correlative conjunctions.
- You can create emphasis using subordination and coordination within longer sentences.
- Problems with subordination include placing main ideas in subordinated clauses and phrases and including too many subordinated ideas in one sentence.

EXERCISES

1. Write a sentence about the thrill of deep-sea diving and include the subordinate idea that the scenery is often amazing.
2. Write a sentence including intercollegiate sports and intramural sports as coordinating ideas of equal weight.
3. Write a sentence using “new car” as an emphasized main idea and “red interior” as a less emphasized subordinated idea.
4. Write a sentence using “blogs” and “Facebook” as coordinated ideas with equal emphases.
5. Using ideas of your own, write a sentence that demonstrates the use of subordinating ideas.
6. Using ideas of your own, write a sentence that demonstrates the use of coordinating ideas.

16.4 Using Parallelism

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize lack of parallelism.
2. Present paired ideas in parallel format.
3. Present items in a series in parallel format.

Parallelism¹⁴ is the presentation of ideas of equal weight in the same grammatical fashion. It's one of those features of writing that's a matter of grammar, style, rhetoric, and content. Used well, it can enhance your readers' (and even your own) understanding and appreciation of a topic. The most famous line from John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address provides another example (a specific kind of reversal of phrasing known as **antimetabole**¹⁵): "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." You'll encounter parallelism not only in politics but in advertising, religion, and poetry as well:

- "Strong enough for a man, but made for a woman."
- "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you."
- "Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice."

Here are a couple of examples of sentences in need of parallelism.

14. The presentation of like-weighted ideas in the same grammatical fashion.

15. A specific kind of parallelism involving the repetition and reversal of elements of a phrase.

Example 1

While it was raining, I had to run into the grocery store, the dry cleaners, and stop at the bookstore.

This sentence is not parallel because it includes three equally weighted ideas but presents two of them with action verbs and one without. By simply adding words such as “duck into” to the middle item, the sentence becomes parallel:
While it was raining, I had to run into the grocery store, duck into the dry cleaners, and stop at the bookstore.

You could also correct this sentence by removing “stop at” from the third idea:
While it was raining, I had to run into the grocery store, the dry cleaners, and the bookstore.

Example 2

The test was long and requiring skills we hadn’t learned.

This sentence is not parallel because it presents two like-weighted ideas using two different grammatical formats. Here is a parallel version:

The test was long and required skills we hadn’t learned.

Parallelism is most often an issue with paired ideas and items in a series as shown in the preceding two examples. A key idea to keep in mind is that you need to use common wording with both items, such as common articles (e.g., *the, a, an*) and common prepositions (e.g., *by, for, of, on, to*). The next two subsections provide more in-depth discussion of these two concepts.

Making Paired Items Parallel

In a sentence, paired items or ideas are often connected with either a **comparative expression**¹⁶ (e.g., *easier than, as much as, bigger than*), a coordinated conjunction

16. A phrase that connects two ideas within a sentence (e.g., *easier than, taller than*).

(e.g., *and*, *but*, *for*, *nor*, *or*, *so*, *yet*), or a correlative conjunction (e.g., *both...and*, *either...or*, *just as...so*, *neither...nor*, *not...but*, *not only...but also*, *whether...or*). Read the following **error examples**. Think of a way to correct each sentence. Then look below the error to see *possible corrections*. Note that you can usually correct each error in more than one way.

Example 1

Comparative Expression

Our neighbor's house is bigger than the size of our house.

Possible Corrections:

Our neighbor's house is bigger than our house.

OR

The size of our neighbor's house is bigger than the size of our house.

Example 2

Coordinated Conjunction

Louie, my crazy shih tzu loves running after Frisbees and plays with leaves.

Possible Corrections:

Louie, my crazy shih tzu, loves running after Frisbees and playing with leaves.

OR

Louie, my crazy shih tzu, loves to run after Frisbees and to play with leaves.

Example 3

Correlative Conjunction

Not only was he rude, but also ate all the shrimp balls.

Possible Corrections:

Not only was he rude, but also he ate all the shrimp balls.

OR

Not only was he rude, but he also ate all the shrimp balls.

Making Items in a Series Parallel

Items in a series include ideas embedded in a sentence as well as those in numbered or bulleted lists. One way to check for parallelism is to say the sentence stem that precedes the first item and then, one at a time, add each subsequent series item to the stem. Assuming the stem works with the first item, subsequent items that do not work with the stem are not parallel with the first item.

Example

After I get off work, I'm driving to the gym, doing five miles, and weights.

Stem prior to the first item: After I get off work, I'm...

Stem works with the first item: After I get off work, I'm driving to the gym.

Stem works with the second item: After I get off work, I'm doing five miles.

Stem does not work with the third item: After I get off work, weights.

A version of the sentence that is parallel: After I get off work, I'm driving to the gym, running five miles, and lifting weights.

Now stem does work with the third item: After I get off work, I'm lifting weights.

Read the two **error examples** and imagine how you could correct each one. Then check below the error for *possible corrections*.

Error Example 1

Embedded Series

On Saturday, my roommates and I are playing in a game of pick-up basketball, collecting coats for charity, work on our homework for three hours, and go to a party in the Village.

Possible Corrections:

On Saturday, my roommates and I are going to play in a game of pick-up basketball, collect coats for charity, spend three hours on homework, and go to a party in the Village.

OR

On Saturday, my roommates and I are playing in a game of pick-up basketball, collecting coats for charity, spending three hours on homework, and going to a party in the Village.

Error Example 2

Listed Series

The people I have met since starting college include the following:

- **Sarah Winston**
- **Joe Fuller, a guy from the Chicago area**
- **Adam Merce and Donna Taylor**
- **Ian Messing from England**
- **and CaLinda Harris, whom I met in math class**

Possible Corrections:

The people I have met since starting college include the following:

- *Sarah Winston*
- *Joe Fuller*
- *Adam Merce*
- *Donna Taylor*
- *Ian Messing*
- *CaLinda Harris*

OR

The people I have met since starting college include the following:

- *Sarah Winston from near Toledo*
- *Joe Fuller from the Chicago area*
- *Adam Merce from Littleton*
- *Donna Taylor from Littleton*
- *Ian Messing from England*
- *CaLinda Harris from Morris, Indiana*

Utilizing Parallel Structure

If you take the most impressive or startling item in a series and place it last, you can draw attention to it as well as to the whole series. Look at the difference in the following two sentences.

Most impressive item last: In the accident, he received cuts on his face, a mild concussion, a cracked rib, and a ruptured spleen.

Most impressive item buried within the series: In the accident, he received cuts on his face, a ruptured spleen, a cracked rib, and a mild concussion.

Using like or paired words along with ideas you are comparing can help you emphasize the comparison.

Example with like words: It's unusual to feel intense attraction and intense repulsion for the same person.

Example with paired words: You always seem to run to guitar lessons and crawl to piano lessons.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Parallelism refers to common grammatical treatment of like-weighted items within a series.
- Parallelism is also a rhetorical and stylistic technique for arranging ideas in a pleasing and effective way.
- Paired ideas within a sentence should be parallel.
- Ideas within a series should be parallel whether embedded in a sentence or listed vertically.
- In almost all situations, more than one possible method exists for making a sentence or list parallel.

EXERCISES

1. Indicate whether relevant parts of each sentence are parallel. Then rewrite the problem sentences to make them parallel.
 - a. Even though I don't get paid as much, working in the psychology office is more meaningful than working at the fast food restaurant.
 - b. According to Lester, both going to a movie and midnight bowling are still being considered.
 - c. Abby, the attorney, and the child advocate named Becca held a meeting before the whole group arrived.
 - d. I have already packed casual pants, my favorite casual tops, dress pants, dress tops, some socks, plenty of underwear, and three pairs of shoes.
 - e. Some must-see sites in Texas include the following:
 - a. the Alamo in San Antonio
 - b. the Riverwalk, which is also in San Antonio
 - c. Big Bend
 - d. Schlitterbaum Water Park that kids love so much
 - e. King Ranch
 - f. South Padre Island
2. Write a sentence telling what you did this past weekend. Include an embedded series or a list in your sentence and make sure the items are parallel.
3. Write a sentence comparing two college classes. Make sure the comparison items are parallel.
4. With your writing group or on your own, find at least three examples of parallelism in advertising, politics, or religious texts. Be prepared to discuss why and how parallelism is used in these kinds of discourse.

16.5 Avoiding Sexist and Offensive Language

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Recognize language that is considered sexist.
2. Avoid sexist language in your writing.
3. Recognize and avoid language that is offensive to any specific group of people.

The rights of women have changed dramatically over the past few decades. Slowly, written English has started to reflect those changes. No longer is it considered appropriate to refer to a “female engineer” or a “male nurse.” It is also unacceptable to refer generically to a doctor as “him,” a teacher as “her,” or a politician as “him.” Such usage is considered to be **sexist language**¹⁷. You can use acceptable **nonsexist language**¹⁸ by using passive voice (see the example in [Section 16.2.5 "Using Passive Voice"](#)), using plural formats (see the examples in [Section 16.5.1 "Using Plural Format"](#)), eliminating pronouns, switching to direct address, and choosing nonsexist terms whenever possible. An option of last resort is to use “his or her,” “his/her,” “her or his,” or “her/his” or even to alternate “his” and “her” throughout a text, though this path is stylistically awkward and usually unnecessary given the other options available to you.

Using Plural Format

By using plural nouns instead of singular nouns, you can switch from sex-specific singular pronouns to **gender-neutral pronouns**¹⁹.

Examples

Example of sexist language using singular pronoun: *A family member who misses a holiday dinner will find **he** has missed more than the food.*

Example of nonsexist language using plural pronoun: *Family members who miss holiday dinners will find **they** have missed more than the food.*

17. Words that suggest that a given situation or role is attributable to members of only one sex (e.g., mailman).

18. Words that suggest that a given situation or role is attributable to members of both sexes (e.g., mail carrier).

19. A pronoun that is neither female nor male (e.g., they, it).

Revising to Eliminate Pronouns

Since English includes many singular **gender-specific pronouns**²⁰, another way to eliminate sexist language is to eliminate the use of pronouns.

Examples

Example of sexist language using singular pronoun: *A family member who misses a holiday dinner will find he has missed more than the food.*

Example of nonsexist language due to elimination of pronoun: *A family member who misses a holiday dinner misses more than the food.*

Using Direct Address

Sometimes you can simply switch from third-person singular to second-person singular or plural and in the process make your tone more engaging.

Examples

Example of sexist language using third-person pronoun: *A student who forgets to bring his book to class will be assessed a ten-point penalty for his daily work.*

Example of nonsexist language using second-person pronoun: *If you forget to bring your book to class, you will be assessed a ten-point penalty for your daily work.*

Choosing Nonsexist Terms

One of the best methods of solving the sexist language problem is to choose nonsexist terms. With a little practice, you can learn to naturally use the currently preferred nonsexist language rather than terms that are no longer acceptable. Study the following table for some examples.

20. A pronoun that is either female or male (e.g., he, she).

Formerly Acceptable	Currently Acceptable
businessman, businesswoman	businessperson, business executive
chairman, chairwoman	chairperson, chair, head, leader
congressman, congresswoman	congressperson, legislator, member of Congress
fireman	firefighter
mailman	mail carrier, mail delivery person, letter carrier, postal worker
man, mankind	humankind, humans, people, <i>Homo sapiens</i> , humanity, the human race
policeman, policewoman	police officer, officer of the law, trooper
salesman	sales associate, salesperson, seller, vendor

Avoiding Other Offensive Language

Whether language is offensive depends entirely on the audience. If the audience or part of the audience views the wording as offensive, then the wording is offensive. To avoid inadvertent offensive text, adhere to the following general guidelines.

- Use currently accepted terminology when referencing groups of people. If you are writing about a group of people and you are unsure of the proper terminology, research the most recent usage patterns before you write.
- Be sensitive when referencing people with disabilities by using a “**people first**”²¹ approach. For example, say “a person who uses a wheelchair” instead of “a wheelchair-bound person.”
- Do not use profanity or vulgar words of any kind. When in doubt, don’t use the term, or if you must use it as part of a quotation, make clear that you’re quoting it.
- Avoid **stereotyping**²² (ascribing positive or negative attributes to people based on groups to which they belong).

21. Wording that recognizes people before conditions of the people (e.g., “person who is blind” as opposed to “blind person”).

22. Attributing common traits to all members of a group.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Some language that was formerly considered acceptable is now considered sexist.
- You can avoid sexist language by using passive voice or plural constructions, by eliminating pronouns, or by switching to direct address.
- Whenever possible, you should choose from among nonsexist terms that are increasingly available.
- Be sensitive when you write. Avoid any language that might offend others.

EXERCISES

1. Rewrite each of the following sentences three times to eliminate the sexist language using the techniques discussed in this section
 - a. When the customer uses abusive language, he can be thrown out of the restaurant.
 - b. A student who habitually arrives late for class is endangering his chances for success.
 - c. There's nothing more important to elementary education than a teacher who is committed to her students.
2. Over the course of a week, record any instances of stereotypes or any shorthand characterizations of groups of people. Share your list with other members of your group or the class as a whole.

16.6 Managing Mood

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand imperative, indicative, and subjunctive verb moods.
2. Revise passages with inconsistent verb moods.
3. Write passages using uniform verb mood.

The mood of a verb can be **imperative**²³, **indicative**²⁴, or **subjunctive**²⁵. Although those three words might make mood sound somewhat complicated, in reality you are likely quite familiar with the different moods. Study this table for clarification.

Verb Moods	Explanations	Examples
Imperative	<p>The subject is understood to be the reader and is not given in the sentence.</p> <p>Imperative sentences include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commands • Requests • Advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control your partying when you are in college. • Please keep your future in mind as you make choices. • Limit partying to the weekends so you will be more likely to find success as a college student.

23. Sentence format in which the subject is understood to be the reader and the sentence gives a command, makes a request, or gives advice.

24. Sentence format that presents statements, facts, opinions, and questions.

25. Sentence format using base form of present tense verbs, simple past form for past tense verbs, and “were” for all forms of the verb “to be” to relay wishes, recommendations, doubts, and contrary-to statements.

Verb Moods	Explanations	Examples
<p>Indicative (or declarative)</p>	<p>Indicative sentences include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statements • Facts • Opinions • Questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During my first year in college, I was more focused on having fun with my friends than on studying. • About one-third of eighteen-year-old college freshmen drop out within their first year of college. • Although some colleges try to control your behavior with rules, you need to figure out for yourself how to successfully balance your class work and your personal life. • Do you think it helps to have

Verb Moods	Explanations	Examples
		<p>midnight curfews for students who live in dormitories?</p>
Subjunctive	<p>Present-tense verbs remain in the base form rather than changing to match the number or person of the subject. Past-tense verbs are the same as simple past tense.</p> <p>Exception: The verb “to be” uses “were” in all situations.</p> <p>Subjunctive sentences include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wishes • Recommendations • Doubts • Contrary-to statements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [present tense] It is important that I be [NOT am] focused on doing homework before partying. • [present tense] I suggest a student work [NOT student works] on assignments every Friday afternoon. • [past tense] If I were [NOT was] him, I’d have stayed at the library with my laptop for a few hours. • [past tense] If I hadn’t

Verb Moods	Explanations	Examples
		<p style="text-align: center;">seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it.</p>

Problems with mood occur when the mood shifts within a sentence, as shown in the following table. In the table, the revisions were all made to match the mood that the sentence initially used. You could also choose to make different revisions that are equally acceptable.

Verb Moods	Problem Shifts	Revisions
Started with imperative and switched to subjunctive	Control your schedule, and I'd choose the number of hours I need for homework before talking to anyone about weekend plans.	Control your schedule and choose the number of hours you need for homework before talking to anyone about weekend plans.
Started with indicative and switched to imperative	People don't think for themselves and stop being so wishy-washy.	Think for yourself and stop being so wishy-washy.
Started with subjunctive and switched to imperative	It matters that you be in charge of your success and you should stop blaming others.	It matters that you be in charge of your success and stop blaming others.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Verb moods include imperative, indicative, and subjunctive.
- Inconsistent verb moods can make text confusing.
- Avoid using multiple verb moods within a single passage.

EXERCISES

1. The following passage has inconsistent verb moods. Identify the existing verb moods as imperative, indicative, and/or imperative. Then revise the passage so that it has consistent verb moods.

Don't go to the party on Friday night. If I were you, I'd spend Friday in the library and go to the big party on Saturday. Physics majors need to stay focused.

2. Write three sentences using each of these verb moods in one of the sentences: imperative, indicative, subjunctive.
3. Write a passage with at least three sentences. Use a consistent verb mood throughout the passage.