



SENTENCE LENGTH

A variety of sentences with a mixture of sentence lengths is a sign of a mature, sophisticated writing style. Becoming familiar with how to shorten or lengthen sentences will help you revise when your sentences are too choppy, too repetitive, or too underdeveloped.

36a

Check for choppy sentences

Nothing is wrong with a short simple sentence every once in a while; however, many short simple sentences in a row can create a dull and repetitive rhythm that is uncomfortable for the reader. Consider the following sentences.

- The Hollywood sign is a national monument. The Hollywood sign is in Griffith Park in Los Angeles. The sign is 45 feet tall. It has white letters. It was created as an advertisement in 1923.

What can you do to rephrase these short and choppy sentences that have the same simple-subject-predicate rhythm? You can join some of the sentences together by using coordinating conjunctions (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*) and creating some compound sentences.

Compound sentences → The Hollywood sign is a national monument, and it is located in Griffith Park in Los Angeles. The sign is 45 feet tall, and it has white letters. It was created as an advertisement in 1923.

What do you notice about the above sentences? Does compounding make that dull and repetitive rhythm disappear? Probably not enough.

Plus, it was difficult to join the last sentence to the rest of the description. To improve even more, you can try combining more of the sentences by using complex sentences.

Complex sentences → The Hollywood sign, which is located in Griffith Park in Los Angeles, is 45 feet tall with white letters. It was created as an advertisement in 1923.

Combining sentences by creating complex sentences helped cut out words and made the first sentence flow much better. However, we are still left with the last simple sentence that was difficult to combine. To improve even more, you can combine all the sentences using both complex and compound strategies.

Compound and complex → The Hollywood sign, which is located in Griffith Park in Los Angeles, is 45 feet tall with white letters; it was created as an advertisement in 1923.

For more information on using sentence combining to create compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences, see **Section IV**.

Helpful hint

You can check the grade level of your writing by looking at the Flesch-Kincaid index. You can pull this up in Microsoft Word under the grammar checker and spell checker menu.

36b

Check for excessive coordination

When you use compound sentences to bring some variety to your writing, you are using a combining strategy that we use quite often in oral language. Be careful, though, that you do not overuse it in your writing since doing so will make your writing sound too conversational for academic writing.

Too conversational → The Hollywood sign is located in Griffith Park in Los Angeles, and it is 45 feet tall and has white letters, and it was created as an advertisement in 1923.

Use compound sentences sparingly, and mix them with complex sentences or compound-complex sentences to bring more intricacy to your writing.

OK → The Hollywood sign, which is located in Griffith Park in Los Angeles, is 45 feet tall with white letters; it was created as an advertisement in 1923.

36c

Check for excessive subordination and modification

Creating complex sentences is done by using subordination and modification, and adding this complexity to your writing gives a more sophisticated style. However, be careful that you do not overuse subordination and modification to the point where it is difficult for the reader to understand what you are joining or describing.

Too complex → The Hollywood sign, which was created as an advertisement in 1923 and which is located in Griffith Park, which is in Los Angeles, is 45 feet tall with white letters.

OK → The Hollywood sign, which is located in the Griffith Park of Los Angeles, is 45 feet tall with white letters; it was created as an advertisement in 1923.

EXERCISE 1

Directions: Revise these sentences that have excessive coordination, subordination, or modification.

1. The McDonald's sign that is in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, is the only surviving example of a single arch McDonald's sign in Arkansas; the sign was erected in 1962, and it remained in its original location until 2007, and it was added to the U.S. Register of Historic Places in 2006.



2. In 2007, the sign, which is in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, was moved to a new location, which was also in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

3. The Pine Bluff sign has many of the typical features of an early single arch McDonald's sign; it is back-lit; it has plastic panels in a metal frame; it has red advertising midway down the arch.
4. No one knows how many single arch McDonald's signs still exist, but there is one in Biloxi, Mississippi, and there is one in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and there is one in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and there is one in Huntsville, Alabama.
5. The sign that is in Pine Bluff is the only single arch McDonald's sign that is on the U.S. Register of Historic Places, which is the United State's official list of buildings that are deemed worthy of preservation.

36d

Add descriptive words and phrases

You can enhance the descriptiveness of your sentences by adding modifiers in different places in the sentence.

1. Add descriptive nouns and noun phrases

Develop more descriptive noun phrases by adding pre-modifiers, such as adjectives, and post-modifiers, such as appositives, prepositional phrases, or relative clauses. Doing so will lengthen your sentences and show off your vocabulary.

Noun Phrase → the house

With pre-modifier → the **big blue**
house Adj Adj

With pre-modifier and post-modifier → the **big blue** house,
Adj Adj

a Colonial, **which is sitting on the corner of Sixth and Elm.**
Appositive Relative Clause



You can also lengthen your sentences and show off your vocabulary by replacing simple nouns with words that carry more than a simple description.

Simple noun → house

Possible variations → abode, adobe, Colonial, domicile, dwelling, habitat, igloo

2. Add descriptive verbs

Your sentences can become more descriptive by changing out simple verbs for ones that fit the scene you are trying to set or describe. Remember, though, that your vocabulary should match the type of academic writing you are doing.

Simple verb → go

Possible variations → depart, exit, hit the road, make tracks, take leave

3. Add descriptive adjectives

Adjectives can be used in three different ways to add more description to a sentence. Showing that you have the facility to use all three types demonstrates a more sophisticated writing style.

A. ADJECTIVES AS PRE-MODIFIERS

An adjective or adjective phrase can be used to modify the noun that follows it.

Adjective → the **wet** sign

Conjoined adjective phrase → the **wet and moldy** sign

Adjective phrase with modifying adverb → the **extremely wet and moldy** sign

B. ADJECTIVES AS POST-MODIFIERS

An adjective or adjective phrase can modify the noun it follows.

Adjective → That problem, **undoable**, was the only one I did not complete.

Conjoined adjective phrase → The sign, **wet and moldy**, needs to be replaced.

Adjective phrase with modifying adverb → The sign, **quite wet and moldy**, needs to be replaced.

C. ADJECTIVES AS COMPLEMENTS

An adjective or adjective phrase can modify a subject as a subject complement, or it can modify a direct object as an object complement.

Subject complement/adjective →
That problem is **frustrating**.

Subject complement/adjective phrase → That problem is **quite frustrating**.

Object complement/adjective →
All the students called the problem **undoable**.

Object complement/adjective phrase → All the students called the problem **frustratingly undoable**.



4. Add descriptive adverbs

Adverbs or adverb phrases can be used to bring more description to your sentences by modifying verbs, adjectives, other adverbs, or even full sentences.

Modifying a verb → The Hollywood sign was created **originally** as an advertisement.

Modifying an adjective → The **extremely** tall Hollywood sign was created as an advertisement.

Modifying another adverb → The answer to the problem was **quite** frustratingly obvious after the teacher revealed it.

Modifying a sentence → The answer to the problem was frustrating; **consequently**, the students failed the test.

5. Add descriptive prepositional phrases

Prepositional phrases can be used to modify a variety of elements in a sentence. They can give optional adverbial-type information about time or place; they can give more detail to a noun phrase, adjective phrase, or adverbial phrase; or they can function as an adverbial complement.

Optional adverbial → **In the spring**, the Hollywood sign is cleaned.

Post-modifier to a noun → The Hollywood sign, **in Griffith Park**, is cleaned each spring.

Post-modifier to an adjective → Climbing to the Hollywood sign is supposed to be difficult **for most people**.

Post-modifier to an adverbial → The park ranger looked angrily **at us** when we started up the path to the Hollywood sign.

EXERCISE 2

Directions: Revise the following simple sentences by using the modifier type given in parentheses.

1. The Skipping Girl Vinegar sign is located on Victoria Street in Melbourne, Australia. (add descriptive adjective)
2. The sign is a painted metal structure. (add descriptive prepositional phrase)
3. The sign is also known as Little Audrey. (add descriptive noun phrase)
4. The sign was manufactured in 1936 to advertise vinegar. (add descriptive verb phrase)
5. The sign replicates the skipping girl on the original vinegar bottle. (add descriptive adjective)

