



Making Our Sentences Better

Sentences are shaped by specific context and driven by specific purpose, so no rules or mechanical protocols can prepare us for the infinite number of tasks our sentences must accomplish. But there are a number of basic strategies that we can learn that can help make our sentences more effective.

Sentences are the most important building block of prose, the foundation of written communications, and always the essential units of prose style. The sentence is where we must start if we hope to understand why some writing captivates us and other writing leaves us unmoved. To be better writers, we must first write better sentences.

The sequence of words we identify as sentences are capable of providing fundamental feelings just as surely as they are capable of conveying critical information. Sometimes the way sentences unfold their meaning is the most important meaning they offer. When speaking we consider not only context, but emphasis, inflection and intonation as important: –it's not what you said, but the way you said it that matters– Expressing that concept is important in writing as well.

Sentences are sequences of words, but just adding words together does not create a sentence. A proposition which, is usually expressed in the form of a sentence, is a statement about reality that can be accepted or rejected. A sentence will always express one or more propositions and a proposition will always be in the form of the sentence. As an example, consider this simple sentence:

The sentence: I am a teacher.

The propositions: I exist.

There is a thing called a teacher.

I am one of those.

While many of us have been taught that a sentence is a sequence of words containing a subject and a predicate that expresses an idea, most sentences express or imply a number of ideas. The basic unit of writing is the proposition, not the word or even the sequence words, and we build sentences by putting propositions together. The style of a sentence is determined by the ways in which we combine not words, but the propositions those words stand for. By thinking about how sentences combine propositions to present information, we can put propositions together in ways to present our ideas more effectively.

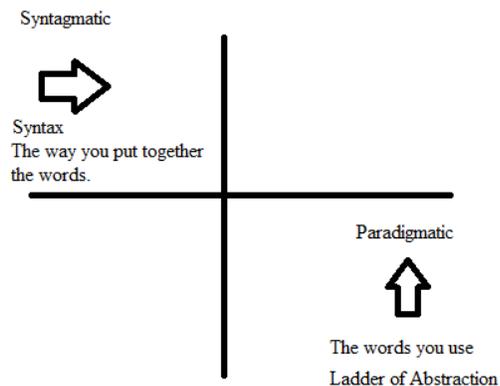
Each sentence we write reflects three main kinds of choices we make:

1. What to write about and what we want to accomplish writing about it.
The propositions we want to advance.
2. Which words to use.
The vocabulary we choose.
3. What order we put them in.
The syntax or order in which we want our readers to experience our propositions.

There's not much in a craft study to help you choose your subject matter or propositional content, or decide what you want your writing to do. It can guide some important things you want to consider as you choose the words you use.

Paradigmatic choices affect the degree of precision in your vocabulary choices (remember the ladder of abstraction).

Syntagmatic choices affect the way you put together the words you choose that is, the syntax.



A sentence by Gertrude Stein: Why should a sequence of words be anything but a pleasure?

Propositions: There are these things we call words.

Words can be put together in a sequence.

Words in a sequence can give pleasure.

Words in a sequence ought to give pleasure.

Words in a sequence should give nothing but pleasure.

Are there reasons why words in a sequence should not give pleasure?

And on and on and on...

Consider the paradigmatic choices made by Gertrude. Instead of *sequence of words* she could have said:

String of words
Series of words.
Bunch of words.
Combination of words.
Number of words.

Notice that each different selection would have affected the sentence, changing its meaning or the way it strikes the reader ever so slightly. She could have also changed pleasure to: delight, joy, happiness, or enjoyment. The take away here is, word selection, expressing the propositions will affect how the sentence impacts the reader.

As an example, using the ladder of abstraction, the sentence: *I got into my car.*

To include less detail. I could've said: *I got into my vehicle.* Or for more detail: *I got into my model T Ford.*

Consider the Syntagmatic choices made by Gertrude, she could have arranged the words in a different order:

Why shouldn't words and a sequence always be a pleasure?
Shouldn't a sequence of words be always a pleasure?
A sequence of words should always be a pleasure.
Always a pleasure words in a sequence should be.

We read the sentences differently, each reflects different stylistic choices and like with our word choices, each hits the reader just a little bit differently than Gertrude's original sentence. Another way of looking at this is that when we write we are doing something with our sentences and what we do unfolds in time. The information we can summarize and paraphrase contained in our sentences is only a part of what the sentences mean since what they do to a reader—the way they direct the reader's thinking and unfold information—may be as important as the information they contain.

Sentences combine information, by coordinating it, by subordinating it, or by subsuming it in a modification. Sentences differ by the way they combine information through *loose syntax* that put the subject and verb near the beginning of the sentence, and those that do so through *periodic syntax*, delaying the unfolding of the sentence's more important news until the end of the sentence, creating a sense of suspense, and the *cumulative* syntax sentence is a special kind of loose syntax that can also function suspensively and offers powerful creative or common-sense payoffs to the writer.

Examples and Observations

At its simplest the ***loose sentence*** contains a main clause plus a subordinate construction:

- *We must be wary of conclusions drawn from the ways of the social insects, since their evolutionary track lies so far from ours.* (Robert Ardrey)

The number of ideas in loose sentences is easily increased by adding phrases and clauses, related either to the main constructions or to a preceding subordinate one:

- *I found a large hall, obviously a former garage, dimly lit, and packed with cots.* (Eric Hoffer)
- *I knew I had found a friend in the woman, who herself was a lonely soul, never having known the love of man or child.* (Emma Goldman)

As the number of subordinate constructions increases, the loose syntax sentence approaches the **cumulative** style.

A **periodic sentence** is a long and frequently involved sentence, marked by suspended arrangement, in which the sense is not completed until the final word.

- *“To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, that is genius.”*
(Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 1841)
- *“Like the waters of the river, like the motorists on the highway, and like the yellow trains streaking down the Santa Fe tracks, drama, in the shape of exceptional happenings, had never stopped there.”*
(Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*, 1966)

A **cumulative sentence** is an independent clause followed by a series of subordinate constructions (phrases or clauses) that gather details about a person, place, event, or idea.

- *“He dipped his hands in the dichloride solution and shook them—a quick shake, fingers down, like the fingers of a pianist above the keys.”*
(Sinclair Lewis, *Arrowsmith*, 1925)
- *“The radiators put out lots of heat, too much, in fact, and old-fashioned sounds and smells came with it, exhalations of the matter that composes our own mortality, and reminiscent of the intimate gases we all diffuse.”*
(Saul Bellow, *More Die of Heartbreak*. William Morrow, 1987)