
GUIDELINES FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE SENTENCES

1. SENTENCES SHOULD CONTAIN ONLY ONE IDEA.

Sentences that contain more than one idea weaken the message. Too many ideas expressed without a pause tend to run together in the reader's mind.

WEAK

Thank you, Ms. Johnson, for your letter of April 30 complimenting the National Business Report and giving us your summer address, where we will send your next three copies, beginning with the June issue.

Did you find yourself reading this sentence twice? Were you confused by the time you got to the end of the sentence?

In this example, the writer is trying to do two things: (1) thank the customer for her letter, and (2) tell her that her request will be handled. Neither idea stands out because the two ideas are joined in one sentence. A simple change will stress both ideas.

STRONG

Thank you, Ms. Johnson, for your letter of April 30 complimenting the National Business Report. Beginning with the June issue, your next three copies will be sent to your summer address.

Putting too many ideas into one sentence frequently results in a run-on sentence, which is not only confusing but also grammatically incorrect. A run-on sentence consists of two or more independent clauses without the proper punctuation. A run-on sentence sometimes may not have a coordinating conjunction, such as and, but, or, or nor; therefore, the sentence is composed of two independent clauses that run on.

I have completed this project I am ready for another one.

Run-on sentences can be corrected by making separate sentences from the independent clauses, by adding appropriate punctuation, or by adding an appropriate coordinating conjunction.

The following run-on sentence, taken from an actual memo, contains three ideas:

RUN-ON

Please be prepared to discuss your ideas at the meeting, they don't have to be typed, if possible, though, they should be written in outline form.

This sentence could be confusing even if it were correctly punctuated. (It isn't.) Notice how much clearer it is when the three ideas are separated:

CLEAR

Please be prepared to discuss your ideas at the meeting. They don't have to be typed; if possible, though, they should be written in out-line form.

Give more emphasis to an important idea by dividing it into two parts and expressing each part in a separate sentence. Even though the following weak example is not a run-on, the message is much stronger as two sentences:

WEAK

We promise you excellent service in the future, and please let us know how we can make your next flight more enjoyable.

STRONG

We promise you excellent service in the future. Please let us know how we can make your next flight more enjoyable.

2. SENTENCES SHOULD CONTAIN ONE COMPLETE THOUGHT.

A group of words that gives merely part of an idea is a sentence fragment. Because a sentence must express one complete thought, a sentence fragment is not a sentence. A fragment splits one thought into two parts, as in the following example:

FRAGMENT

To update your records and actively reflect Hale Manufacturing's economic standing in the community. We submit the annual report for your review.

The first part of this example is not a complete sentence. An idea is started in the first statement and completed in the sentence that follows. The two statements should be joined to express one complete thought.

SENTENCE

To update your records and actively reflect Hale Manufacturing's economic standing in the community, we submit the annual report for your review.

The second part of the following example illustrates another sentence fragment.

FRAGMENT

The brochure describes some of the more advanced techniques of making sound investments. Including a candid analysis of the strategies and risks involved.

The part *Including a candid analysis of the strategies and risks involved* expands the idea expressed in the first sentence but is not a complete sentence in itself. For a complete sentence, join the two parts.

SENTENCE

The brochure describes some of the more advanced techniques of making sound investments, including a candid analysis of the strategies and risks involved.

Sentence fragments, usually introduced by prepositions or participles, are frequently found as opening and closing ideas in business letters. Sentence fragments are problems, especially in either of these positions because the first and last few words of a message should be the most emphatic. Look at the following openings, which contain sentence fragments:

WEAK OPENINGS

Realizing that an insurance company must make fast, fair adjustments. The Scranton Insurance Agency pledges to give you the best service available in the Mt. Horeb area.

With reference to your suggestion concerning refunds. I appreciate this information and will follow up within a week.

You can make these openings grammatically acceptable by simply substituting a comma for the first period in each of them. You can make them much stronger, however, by effectively rewording the sentences.

STRONG OPENINGS

An insurance company must make fast, fair adjustments. The Scranton Insurance Agency knows this and pledges to give you the best service available in the Mt. Horeb area.

Your suggestion concerning our refund policy is welcome. Within a week I hope to have a solution to this problem of refunds.

Rewording can also turn a weak closing containing a sentence fragment into an effective, strong closing, as in the following example.

WEAK CLOSING

Thanking you in advance for your courtesy and cooperation in this matter.

STRONG CLOSING

I will appreciate your cooperation.

Sometimes the deliberate use of a sentence fragment can be very effective, especially to establish an informal, friendly tone. A fragment can be made to express a complete thought if an exclamation point or a question mark is placed after it, as in the following examples:

That's right—lifetime protection! Worldwide, 24 hours a day.

Tonight! Our special Sundown-to-Sunup 40 Percent-Off Sale—don't miss it!

This informality may be useful in a sales letter or direct mail advertisement in which the writer must quickly establish both friendliness and trust in the reader. Such informality, however, may be inappropriate in other business communications. The receiver may interpret it as sarcasm, insincerity, or deficiency in grammar. If the receiver is angry, worried, or fearful, he or she will not appreciate a very informal writing style. For this reason, use sentence fragments sparingly—only when you have a clear purpose in mind and you are able to anticipate your reader's reaction.

3. SENTENCES SHOULD BE WRITTEN IN THE ACTIVE VOICE.

Effective writing creates force through the use of action verbs—those used in the active voice rather than the passive voice. In Chapter 1, active and passive voices were defined this way:

ACTIVE VOICE

The subject of the sentence performs the action described by the verb.

PASSIVE VOICE

The subject *receives* the action described by the verb.

The active voice creates the illusion of movement while the passive voice limits movement. The passive voice may be the worst offender in dull, weak writing. Although the passive voice can be used to soften a negative statement, for example, it should be used sparingly.

Why does the passive voice hurt readability? Consider the following example in the active voice.

ACTIVE VOICE

Brian typed the letter.

This simple sentence brings a picture of Brian typing to the reader's mind. Active-voice sentences emphasize the action—the "doing" that the sentences describe. Now let's put our example into the passive voice:

PASSIVE VOICE

The letter was typed by Brian.

In the passive version, the writer needs six words to tell what took only four words in the active voice. Notice, also, how the emphasis has shifted. The mental picture is now of a typed letter—no Brian, no typing, just a typed letter. The action is gone, and the person who did

the acting is gone, too. This shift of emphasis robs passive sentences of their interest and clarity; they become poor forms of communication. This example illustrates two major drawbacks to using passive constructions:

1. They require more words without adding to the meaning.
2. They weaken the sentence's impact by taking away emphasis from the action and the person who performs the action.

People should be the subjects of your sentences whenever possible. To keep your writing flowing and lively, stress the "people element." Write in the active voice to give the reader a picture of the subject performing the action. Communicating in the active voice creates a stronger message—one that is more direct, concise, personal, and vigorous.

4. SENTENCES SHOULD BE GRAMMATICALLY CORRECT.

Basic English errors in sentences may make the receiver think the sender is ignorant or careless—or both. What is good English, and what are the rules of good English? The "rules" are actually general agreements among the users of English on how to use the language for various purposes in various circumstances. Your goal, as a successful communicator, is to use the rules followed by the majority of skilled writers and speakers in the business world.

Subject and Verb Agreement

A glaring error that communicators make is neglecting to check for agreement between the subject and verb. A verb should agree with its subject in person and in number:

- A singular subject requires a singular verb.
- A plural subject requires a plural verb.

Remember to check your writing closely for subject and verb agreement.

Parallel Construction

Using parallel construction improves sentence clarity. Parallel construction simply means using similar grammatical structures in phrases, clauses, and lists to express similar ideas.

Using parallelism is important in all writing, especially when dealing with series, contrasts, and comparisons. Look at the following sentence, which contains a series in list format:

Effective sentences should:

- Contain only one idea
- Use the active voice
- One complete thought
- Naturally fit together

Notice the items in the list are not parallel in construction. One way to make this sentence parallel is to have each of the elements of the series start with an appropriate verb.

Effective sentences should:

- Contain only one idea.
- Use the active voice.
- Contain one complete thought.
- Fit together naturally.

Carelessness is a major contributor to grammatical errors. Writing in a sloppy manner may be easier than writing carefully, but it may also become a difficult habit to break. To avoid the habit of sloppy writing, develop the habit of editing each sentence that you write to ensure that it is mechanically correct.

How do you know what is correct, or standard, English usage? Reading, listening, writing, speaking, and studying and practicing the rules of grammar can help you develop an instinct for correct English usage.

The ability to recite the rules of grammar and punctuation will not necessarily prevent you from making errors. However, the ability to recognize errors is the key to mechanically correct writing. Once you recognize your errors, you can turn to a reliable reference manual or English grammar handbook to verify the rules you need to correct mistakes and to improve usage habits.

The Reference section at the end of this text briefly summarizes rules of grammar and punctuation. Review the rules and the examples until you are confident that you can apply them correctly. In addition, an up-to-date, reliable dictionary and a comprehensive English-usage handbook or reference manual are important resources that will assist you in developing accurate communications. You may want to purchase these references for your personal library.

5. SENTENCES SHOULD BE PUNCTUATED CORRECTLY.

Commas are perhaps the most troublesome of all punctuation marks. Placing commas incorrectly or otherwise misusing them may cause the meaning of sentences to be unclear. The reader may then need to reread sentences several times to understand the intended meaning. Commas are misused in three ways:

1. They are omitted where they are needed.
2. They are inserted where they are not needed.
3. They are misplaced within the sentence.

In each case, the reader's understanding is usually hindered.

One common mistake is to omit one of a pair of commas. For example, commas are needed to set off appositives or explanatory expressions. In the following example, *the editorial assistant* is an appositive, which should be set off by commas. By omitting one of the commas, the sentence conveys a different meaning.

INCORRECT

Rosemary Fitzgerald, the editorial assistant called while you were out of the office.

CORRECT

Rosemary Fitzgerald, the editorial assistant, called while you were out of the office.

Another common error is to use unnecessary commas. For example, a comma may be incorrectly inserted between a subject and its verb.

INCORRECT

Analyzing the data and presenting recommendations by November 4, will be difficult.

CORRECT

Analyzing the data and presenting recommendations by November 4 will be difficult.

Misplaced commas may interrupt the flow of a sentence and cause some hesitation in the reader's understanding.

INCORRECT

The most important topic, and also the most frequently discussed, was the discount rate.

CORRECT

The most important topic and also the most frequently discussed was the discount rate.

Let good usage and common sense be your guides to correct punctuation. Follow accepted rules in punctuation to assure that the receiver will clearly understand your message. Be sure to review the punctuation rules in the Reference section of this textbook.

6. SENTENCES SHOULD BE CONCISE.

Concise communication uses as few words as possible to communicate the message in a clear, courteous manner. Whether long or short, a sentence should be concise. Concise is the opposite of *wordy*; it is not the opposite of *long*. If your sentences are concise, they contain no wasted words.

You have already learned to avoid needless repetition and to use concise words and phrases. You know it is important not to use three or four words to express an idea if one or two words

express the idea as well. Now continue a step further in the communication building process—learn to write concise sentences.

Eliminate Useless Words

Organize sentences to eliminate words that do not help to make the meaning clear or the tone courteous. For example, the opening words *It is*, *There are*, and *There were* generally add nothing to sentences except words. They also tend to lead into stiff, formal writing and passive constructions. When you have used one of these beginnings, try rearranging the sentence to eliminate the phrase and to achieve conciseness.

WORDY

There are several options available to you.

CONCISE

You have several options.

Avoid Repetitiveness

Vague sentences that are limited in meaning waste time and inhibit the receiver's concentration. The only reason for restating a question or an idea that already has been stated clearly and forcefully is to gain emphasis. However, overusing this technique may cause the receiver to become bored and frustrated, especially if the repetition has no purpose or is used to restate the original vague statement. The following rambling paragraph is an example that may create frustration:

WEAK

I would like to ask a question about your summer school course offerings in the computer science curriculum. The offerings at the Madison campus seem to be geared to upper-level students, and I am having difficulty finding introductory-level courses to take. It would help if you could send me schedules from your Reedsburg, Watertown, and Portage campuses, so that I can decide what I want to take this summer and reserve a dorm room early. When these schedules are available, will you please send them to me?

In the above example, the writer's question is buried in a clutter of unnecessary information. The writer is simply requesting summer school schedules; he or she can solve the other problems after receiving the schedules. Is the following example a more forceful request?

STRONG

Please send me summer school schedules for the computer science curriculum at your Reedsburg, Watertown, and Portage campuses.

Omit Obvious Statements

If you agree that concise writing helps your letter accomplish its purpose, then you will also agree that omitting facts the receiver already knows is wise. Stating the obvious wastes words and risks offending the receiver by implying that he or she is ignorant or forgetful. Further, when obvious statements are used at the beginning of business letters instead of direct beginnings, the receiver may assume that the writer does not know how to begin. The advantage of using a direct beginning is lost with such obvious statements.

Many writers begin by telling the reader that they received his or her letter, which they are now answering, or by restating what the reader said in that letter. The fact that the writer is sending an answer is evidence enough that the reader's letter has been received. Do not waste the most effective position in a letter, the opening, by telling the reader "In reply to your letter of March 23,..." or "In your letter of May 7 you stated that..." If a reader doesn't remember all the details of the original letter, a quick glance at the file copy will refresh his or her memory. The goal of the response is to give the reader an answer, not to echo the reader's letter.

The best way to begin a business letter is usually by directly answering the reader's question. Although there are a few situations when you should not begin the letter with the main point, opening a letter with a direct response is usually more effective. Look at these examples.

WEAK

I am in receipt of your letter which is dated March 25. You wanted to know the current prices of our various brands and models of camcorders; so I am enclosing our latest price list, which will cover all this information.

STRONG

Here is our current price list, listed by brands and models, for our camcorders.

WEAK

I am replying to your letter of October 9. With this letter you enclosed a check for \$101.23, the total amount due since August.

STRONG

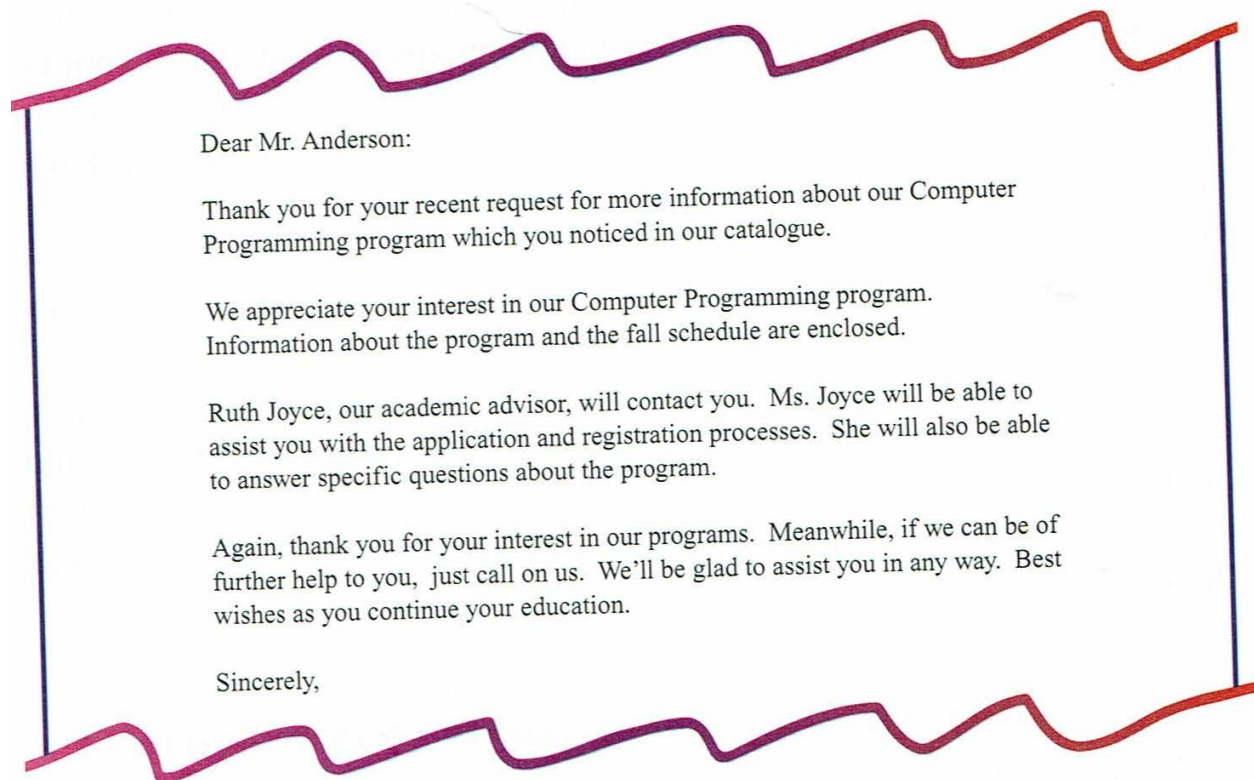
Thank you for your check for \$101.23, which clears your account.

As with beginnings, writers often have trouble with letter endings. After answering the reader's questions and giving information, a writer may then fall back on trite phrases. Look at this example:

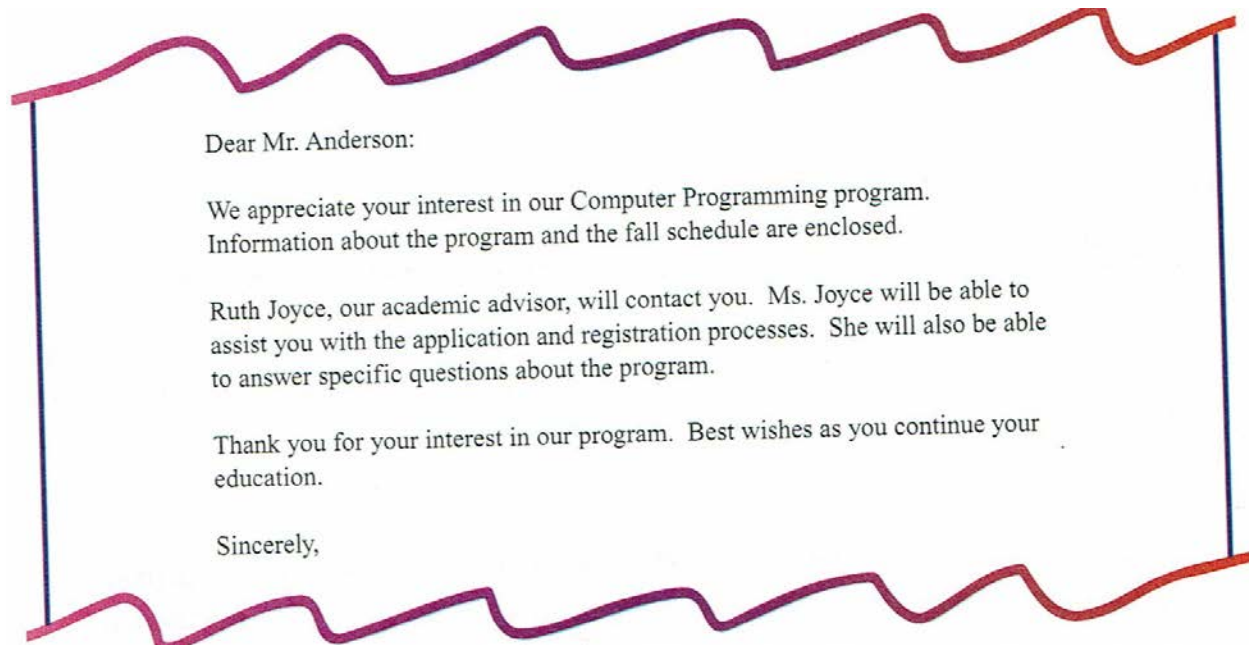
TRITE

Thank you again for your interest in our product. If you need further information with regard to this matter, or if we may assist you in any way, please don't hesitate to contact us.

If thanks have been given once, that's usually enough—say thanks twice and you may appear insincere. Actually, the best expression of gratitude is to do what the reader wants. Similarly, offering further information or assistance in your ending may appear courteous or may mean that you are not sure your answer was complete. Assume that if the reader needs more information or help, he or she will let you know.



Your letter should end with a positive tone. Deleting vague endings, like avoiding obvious beginnings, improves the letter. Take this actual business letter as an example:



Now let's eliminate the first paragraph of this letter. Is the letter weakened? No. Next let's look at the last paragraph. Can it be rewritten to make **it** more concise and clear? Yes.

7. SENTENCES SHOULD BE VARIED IN LENGTH.

For quick, clear, easy reading, all sentences should be short and simple, right? Wrong! Sentences averaging around 17 words in length are considered about right for fast reading. Good sentences can be longer than 20 words or as short as 4 or 5 words for variety and emphasis. Imagine the monotony of a message in which each sentence is exactly 17 words long. The message might put the reader to sleep!

Varying sentence length can enliven writing style. A short sentence placed between two long sentences emphasizes the thought of the short sentence. A few very short sentences help to give the message "punch." Too many short sentences, one after another, can make a letter choppy. Look at the following examples.

CHOPPY

We received your shipment of February 18. It contained four boxes of designer swimwear, Stock No. 1187. There was one box each in Misses sizes 8, 10, 12, and 14. But we ordered four each in Junior sizes 5, 7, 9, and 11. You can see this on the copy of the order, which is enclosed.

STRONG

Your February 18 shipment of four boxes of designer swimwear, Stock No. 1187—one each in Misses sizes 8, 10, 12, and 14—arrived today. However, the

shipment should have consisted of four each in Junior sizes 5, 7, 9, and 11, as shown on the enclosed copy of the order.

Even more irritating to readers than the short, choppy sentence is an extra-long sentence that rambles on and on. This writing fault also hinders readability. In the following example, the writer has jumbled the ideas to the point that the sentence must be reread—perhaps several times—to make any sense.

RAMBLING

In reply to your letter of March 1, we desire to enter it upon the record that, out of our six (6) percent commission to be paid to us by the Colbys for making sale of this property for them, we agree to pay you a commission of three (3) percent of the sale price, amount- ing to \$3,000, as a service to you and as compensation for the work and expense of closing the sale, and we further agree that no portion of this charge shall be assessed against or paid by the purchaser.

The following example is much easier to read:

STRONG

I want to put on record the terms of the agreement you asked about in your March 1 letter. Our commission for selling this property is to be paid by the Colbys. We agree to pay you a commission of three (3) percent of the sale price, amounting to \$3,000, at the closing. We further agree that no portion of this amount shall be charged to the purchaser.

Lengthy sentences result from using too many dependent clauses or from overusing the words *and*, *or*, and *so*. Avoid these two careless writing habits when your goal is clear, effective communication.

The And Habit

The *and* habit, which leads to run-on sentences, is illustrated in this excerpt from a business letter:

WEAK

We presently employ 93,466 persons at 11 sites in the greater Houston area, and this makes us the third largest private employer in the area, and we hope you will see fit to include these figures in your brochure, and we thank you for your cooperation.

You can usually correct this kind of error by eliminating some of the *ands* and breaking up the run-on structure into several sentences. Sometimes, rephrasing the ideas or putting them in the form of a clause makes the new sentences more varied and interesting. Is the following example better?

STRONG

With 93,466 employees at 11 sites in the greater Houston area, Van Buren Manufacturing is the third largest private employer in this area. We would appreciate your including these figures in your brochure.

Instead of the phrase *and so*, use transitional words such as *therefore*, *consequently*, and *accordingly* to connect clauses, as shown in the following examples:

WEAK

Our warehouse in Seattle stocks the Z-45 gasket, and so the manager there has agreed to ship one to you.

STRONG

Our warehouse in Seattle stocks the Z-45 gasket; therefore, the manager there has agreed to ship one to you.

The Dependent-Clause Habit

Chains of dependent clauses produce confusing sentences. A series of overlapping clauses, each hanging on to the one before, introduces new ideas and expands previous ideas so fast that the reader can barely grasp one idea before the next one arrives. Examples of this type of writing are often seen in legislation and legal documents.

Notice all the clauses introduced by the word *which* in this long sentence from a memo:

Ms. Jamie Kerr will take Atlantic Air Flight 376 at 4:15 p.m., which should arrive in Omaha at 6:10 p.m., which means that you should plan to meet her and accompany her to the hockey awards banquet, which begins at 7:30 p.m.

Breaking the main ideas into sentences helps the reader to understand the information in the message more easily, such as in the following example:

STRONG

Ms. Jamie Kerr will arrive in Omaha at 6:10p.m. on Atlantic Air Flight 376. Please plan to meet her and accompany her to the hockey awards banquet, which begins at 7:30 p.m.

Vary your usage of short words, long words, short sentences, and long sentences. Generally, avoid using too many of any one element in your writing

8. SENTENCES SHOULD BE VARIED IN STRUCTURE.

We have already seen that a long string of very short sentences makes for choppy writing, that a sequence of very long sentences makes reading difficult, and that sentences all the same length make a letter boring to read. Another shortcoming that affects the reader's reaction is

identically constructed sentences. A series of sentences having the same construction becomes monotonous and may seem to talk down to the reader.

Besides varying the length of your sentences, you should also vary their structure and pattern. One way to achieve variety in your writing is with different sentence beginnings. Since the way you begin a sentence usually determines the pattern for the sentence as a whole, concentrating on the beginnings is a logical way to control sentence patterns.

You can also vary the structure of your sentences by utilizing a combination of simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex formations.

9. SENTENCES SHOULD FIT TOGETHER NATURALLY.

Just as the words in a sentence should be arranged for smooth reading, so should the sentences in a message. Each sentence should smoothly follow the previous one and flow naturally to the next one. Similarly, one paragraph should lead naturally to the next paragraph to guide the reader from one central thought or point to the next. In writing sentences that fit together smoothly, you will find it helps to (1) refer in some way to the preceding sentence and (2) use transitional words and phrases, or connectives.

Connectives

Some examples of transitional words and phrases include those shown in the following chart:

Transitional Words and Phrases	
also	likewise
as	moreover
as a result	neither nor
because	next
but	on the other hand
consequently	otherwise
either or	previously
first (second, etc.)	rather
for example	similarly
for instance	then
however	therefore
in addition	thus
in comparison	unlike
in contrast	while
in this way	

In the following example, the sentences are clear but are poorly connected to one another:

Your proposal has a great deal of merit. A number of questions need to be answered. A comprehensive market research program should result in an appropriate solution.

Adding a connective ties the thoughts together:

Your proposal has a great deal of merit. Although many questions must still be answered, we should be able to determine an appropriate solution through a comprehensive market research program.

Without connectives, you risk leaving the reader guessing about the relationship between the statements in your message.

POORLY CONNECTED SENTENCES

We agree with many of the suggestions in your report. We shall put some of them into effect immediately. We shall delay action on the remainder and get reports from other sales representatives.

IMPROVED SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

We agree with many of the suggestions in your report and will, therefore, put those into effect immediately. After we have studied reports from other sales representatives, we will decide what to do about your other suggestions. (The word *will* is more often used in modern communications than the word *shall*.)