

## MINI-LESSON



# SENTENCE VARIETY

One way to make your writing more interesting is to improve your sentence variety. When a writer uses a lot of the same types of sentences, it can make the writing feel bland. Look at this paragraph, which is from an early draft of “Frog”:

I emptied the small trash can in my room. I headed back out into the hall. I saw that the frog was still there. I took a step toward him, but he didn’t move. I hovered just above him with the trash can. I could see that little bulgy thing under his neck. It pulsed as he breathed.

This paragraph clearly describes the action that is happening, but so many of the sentences are the same: They start the same, they are about the same length, and they have a similar style. Now let’s look at the same paragraph with better sentence variety:

In my room I emptied the small trash can and headed back into the hall. Still there. I took a step toward him. He didn’t move. Another. Nothing. Soon I was hovering just above him with the trash can, so close I thought I could see that little bulgy thing under his neck pulsing as he breathed.

The second version has a much better mix of sentences. To improve sentence variety in your story, work on varying your sentence lengths, sentence beginnings, and sentence styles.

### **Vary Sentence Length**

When most of your sentences are about the same length, your writing can feel choppy and robotic. So when you are revising, look for places where you can add some very short sentences, and other places where you can combine sentences to make them longer. In the first example from above, most of the sentences are close in length:

I emptied the small trash can in my room (9). I headed back out into the hall (7). I saw that the frog was still there (8). I took a step toward him, but he didn’t move (10). I hovered just above him with the trash can (9). I could see that little bulgy thing under his neck (10). It pulsed as he breathed (5).

In the revised paragraph, the sentence lengths have a much wider variety:

In my room I emptied the small trash can and headed back into the hall (15). Still there (2). I took a step toward him (6). He didn't move (3). Another (1). Nothing (1). Soon I was hovering just above him with the trash can, so close I thought I could see that little bulgy thing under his neck pulsing as he breathed (29).

### Vary Sentence Beginnings

If a lot of your sentences start the same way, it can make your writing feel repetitive. In the paragraph below, all three sentences start with "I" followed by a verb. This makes the paragraph feel repetitive.

**I spent** the next half hour wiping the chocolate syrup and whipped cream off the kitchen island, hanging up my mom's clothes, and vacuuming the Cheeto crumbs from my bedroom floor. **I changed** into my pajamas, brushed my teeth, and curled up on the couch under a blanket. **I found** *Arthur* on Netflix instead of watching a movie, like I normally would.

In the revised paragraph below, two sentences have been rewritten so that they start differently. This adds more interest and variety to the writing.

**The next half hour** was spent wiping the chocolate syrup and whipped cream off the kitchen island, hanging up my mom's clothes, and vacuuming the Cheeto crumbs from my bedroom floor. **I changed** into my pajamas, brushed my teeth, and curled up on the couch under a blanket. **Instead of watching** a movie, like I normally would, I found *Arthur* on Netflix.

### Vary Sentence Styles

If you use a variety of sentence styles in your writing, you can give it more energy and interest. The following paragraph contains several sentences that use the same style, with a simple subject, followed by a verb, and then a little more information:

My parents don't admit she's a babysitter. Chloe is a college student. She is the daughter of my parents' friends. My parents say she comes over to "hang out" with me. Chloe says the same thing. I'm not an idiot. I know what's going on.

If we revise that, changing some of the sentences to give them a different style, it makes the paragraph more interesting.

Of course, they don't admit she's a babysitter. Chloe is a college student, the daughter of my parents' friends, and they say she just comes over to "hang out" with me. Chloe says it, too, but I'm not an idiot. I know what's going on.

One of the best ways to discover new ways to write sentences is by studying published stories to see what other writers do, then imitating their sentence styles in your own writing. For example, the sentence below appears in "Frog." It is made up of a phrase describing the subject, followed by a comma, then an action and another action:

Heart pounding, I took one step closer and stopped.

phrase describing  
the subject

action

action

Other sentences that imitate this same style might be the following:

Panting heavily, the dog charged toward the pool and jumped in.

Their costumes twinkling, the dancers burst onto the stage and dazzled the crowd

Here are two other sentences whose styles you can try. Look at your story draft and find places where you can imitate these sentence styles in your own story.

He was tiny—no bigger than the little handheld pencil sharpener I kept in my backpack—  
but he was definitely, definitely a frog.

Straightening my shoulders, I marched back down the hall, snatched the tennis racket  
from the floor, and kept going.

### What to Do Now

- Go through a chunk of your story and count the number of words in each sentence. If the total number of words in most sentences is pretty close, combine some to make longer sentences, and add a few very short sentences for better variety.
- Read your story out loud and look for places where you are starting lots of sentences the same way. Revise them so they have different beginnings.
- Look through published stories for sentence styles you can imitate in your own writing, and add some of these styles to your story.