

Unit One

Building Strong Sentences: From Compound to Complex

An important step in building strong sentences is the ability to craft sentences that support strong paragraphs. In academic writing, sentences rarely, if ever, occur on their own. They are always a part of a conversation – a conversation between the ideas that your own writing advances, the evidence of other written work you discuss, and the line of thought tying them together into a whole.

Strong sentences *show* that line of thought running through each paragraph of an essay. How can you craft sentences that do this?

Strong sentences in strong paragraphs convey a *relationship* between ideas. There are several ways to build sentences that demonstrate such relationships:

1. From Simple to Compound Sentences

Simple, declarative sentences can be clear and grammatically correct while leaving the reader unclear about what a writer is trying to convey.

Smith's book argues that we need to explore new approaches to education. Teachers are an important asset in the future of America. Students are falling more and more behind today. We need a technological innovation in the classroom.

These sentences are intelligible but hard to follow. Why? First, the reader cannot tell which sentences refer to information in Smith's book, and which do not. Second, the reader cannot tell the relationship between the ideas provided: if teachers, for example, are an important asset, why are students failing?

One way to convey a relationship between ideas is to tie separate sentences into compound sentences – sentences that tie two independent clauses together with *and*, *but*, *yet*, *for*, or *so*.

Teachers are an important asset in the future of America, yet students are falling more and more behind today. Or,

Students are falling more and more behind today, so we need a technological innovation in the classroom.

Note how the addition of “yet” or “so” radically changes the implied meaning. The ideas are no longer simply adjacent, sitting beside each other like people on a bench. They are now *doing* things to each other. “But” and “yet” push *against* each other, showing contrasts or antitheses. “So” pushes something *forward*, showing an idea that results from another one.

2. From Compound to Complex Sentences

Compound sentences can only do so much. Separate sentences can only line up or push against each other for so long before the reader feels like he or she is reading a series of back and forth statements. We often need more complex ways to convey the relationship between ideas and sentences. For example:

*Smith's book argues that we need to explore new approaches to education. **Even though teachers are an important asset in the future of America**, students are also falling more and more behind today. **Because of this decline**, improving the quality of*

*our teachers is not enough. **According to Smith**, we need a technological innovation in the classroom.*

The sentences highlighted in bold are what we call “complex” sentences. A “complex” sentence does not mean a *confusing* sentence. Rather, it means a sentence that shows a more complex relationship between ideas than simply sticking independent thoughts together in a compound sentence. A complex sentence shows *how one or more ideas depend on another idea*. Thus, a complex sentence contains what we call *dependent*, or subordinate, clauses.

You can usually spot complex sentences because they contain clauses that begin with words or phrases like the following – what we call “subordinating” words or phrases:

<i>While</i>	<i>Whereas</i>	<i>During</i>
<i>Although</i>	<i>According to</i>	<i>As a result of</i>
<i>Even though</i>	<i>After</i>	<i>By</i>
<i>Because</i>	<i>Before</i>	<i>If ... then ...</i>

Left on their own, sentences that begin with words like these can produce sentence fragments, as we discussed in the last worksheet:

While I agree with Johnson. **[Sentence Fragment]**
Even though she has no idea what she is talking about. **[Sentence Fragment]**

Once these dependent clauses are hitched to independent clauses, however, they can combine to form stronger, more interesting thoughts:

While I agree with Johnson, his theory of childhood education is only partly accurate.
Even though she has no idea what she is talking about, Beatrice makes a valid point about healthcare.
Because of the Bears’ inadequate offensive line, Jay Cutler looks like a weak quarterback.
As a result of our long struggle to improve its research, the program is now thriving.
After careful consideration of all the evidence above, Johnson’s article concludes with a call to arms.

These sentences are interesting because they imply ideas that do not merely sit next to or push against one another. They show complex relationships between ideas: ideas that draw distinctions (“While,” “Even though,” “Although”), ideas that result from other ones (“As a result of,” “Because,” “If...then...”), ideas that are chronological (“After,” “Before,” “During,”), and ideas that attribute responsibility (“According to”).

Lesson: a mix of simple, compound, and complex sentences can help lead to paragraphs that show a line of thought and the kind of relationship between the ideas that form it.

Practice Exercises: Making Connections

A. For each of the following examples, connect the separate sentences into one, complete sentence using (a) a compound sentence, and (b) a complex sentence.

1. The book has been returned. It was marked all over.

(a)

(b)

2. Jameson believes that we should revise our understanding of heroic literature. His argument should be examined carefully.

(a)

(b)

3. I grew up believing that all books were like textbooks. Literacy meant gaining knowledge that was required.

(a)

(b)

B. Re-write the following paragraph on the back side of this paper. Use a mix of simple, compound, and complex sentences to show a line of thought from the beginning of the paragraph to the end. Be careful to avoid sentence fragments, comma splices, or run-on sentences in your own writing.

I could not enjoy reading novels after the fifth grade. Mrs. Moore's high school English class taught me to enjoy reading poetry. I learned to look for the sound of words on the page. I read poets like Wordsworth or Auden with pleasure. They focused on tiny details. Their poems spoke of worlds I did not know existed. Mrs. Moore made a different kind of literature come to life for me. Only later in high school did I re-discover long-form reading. The lessons I learned from Mrs. Moore made that possible.