**SYNTAX**

Syntax is the combination and arrangement of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences. Sentence variety should not be used for its own sake but rather to express ideas clearly, clarify the relationships among ideas, and emphasize the most important ideas within each sentence.

When looking at syntax, it is helpful to begin in these places:

1. Sentence length
2. Punctuation
3. Sentence components
4. The placement of sentence components

**Sentence Length**

**Dramatically short sentences**: A common way to create emphasis is to use a dramatically short sentence. Especially following a long and involved sentence, a short declarative sentence helps drive a point home. Here are two examples, the first from Edwin Newman and the second from David Wise:

*Meaning no disrespect, I suppose there is, is not general rejoicing, at least some sense of relief when the football season ends. It’s a long season.*

*The executive suite on the thirty-fifth floor of the Columbia Broadcasting System skyscraper in Manhattan is a tasteful blend of dark wood paneling, expensive, abstract paintings, thick carpets, and pleasing odors. It has the quiet look of power.*

**Sentence Fragments**: Experienced writers sometimes use sentence fragments when they want to achieve a special effect or place special emphasis on something. Often the impact of sentence fragments is emotional.

*They are people who have no homes*. No drawer that holds the spoons. No window to look out upon the world. My God. (Anne Quindlen)

**Long, drawn out sentences**: Particularly lengthy sentences have a variety of purposes. For example, they can intentionally tire the reader or make them feel as though they are being dragged along. Readers tend to wait for punctuation marks for permission to stop or breathe. Consider this example from Samuel Beckett:

*Thus it was not rare to find, on the Sunday, the tallboy on its feet by the fire, and the dressing table on its head by the bed, and the night-stool on its face by the door, and the washand-stand on its back by the window; and, on the Monday, the tallboy on its back by the bed, and the dressing table on its face by the door, and the night-stool on its back by the window and the washand-stand on its feet by the fire; and on the Tuesday…*

**Punctuation**

Every form of punctuation has a different intention and effect, otherwise we would only have and need commas!

* Punctuation can influence tone:
  + **Question marks and exclamation points** can drastically alter the tone of the sentence. For example:
    - You have a baby!!
    - You have a baby.
    - You have a baby?
  + Repeated use of question marks or exclamation points can influence the feel of the tone of the entire piece.
* Punctuation can influence the way ideas relate to one another.
  + **Semi-colons**, for example, provide more separation and space between your ideas than **commas** do, but less separation and space than a **period**.
    - I was cutting an onion. I started crying. I cut my finger.
    - I was cutting an onion; I started crying; I cut my finger.
    - I was cutting an onion, I started crying, I cut my finger.
  + And **dashes** generally separate one piece of the sentence from everything else.
    - I was cutting an onion – I started crying – I was thinking of you.
* Punctuation can influence reading speed, which in turn will influence how you feel about the topic.
  + A sentence with lots of **commas** will read significantly more slowly than one **without them**.
    - “There were frowzy fields, and cow-houses, and dunghills, and dustheaps, and ditches, and gardens, and summer-houses, and carpet-beating grounds, at the very door of the Railway. Little tumuli of oyster shells in the oyster season, and of lobster shells in the lobster season, and of broken crockery and faded cabbage leaves in all seasons, encroached upon its high places.” (Charles Dickens)

**Sentence Components**

FANBOYS

Often, a writer wants to place equal emphasis on several facts or ideas. One way to do this is to give each its own sentence. For example:

*Nancy Lopez selected her club. She lined up her shot. She chipped the ball to within a foot of the pin.*

But a long series of short, simple sentences quickly becomes tedious. Many writers combine these three sentences using coordinating conjunction, or FANBOYS. The coordinating conjunctions *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, and so* connect words, phrases, and clauses of **equal importance.**

*Nancy Lopez selected her club, lined up her shot, and chipped the ball to within a foot of the pin.*

By coordinating three sentences into one, the writer not only makes the same words easier to read, but also shows that Lopez’s three actions are equally important parts of a single process.

Writers can also choose to replace commas in a list with even more coordinating conjunctions, and that is a choice that again changes the feeling of the piece.

*Nancy Lopez selected her club and lined up her shot and chipped the ball to within a foot of the pin*

Dependent Clauses

*Subordination* is the process of giving one idea **less emphasis** than another in a sentence. Writers subordinate ideas by introducing them either with subordinating conjunctions, aka dependent clause markers (*because, if, as though, while, when, after, in order that*). **Subordination de-emphasizes the idea connected to the dependent clause marker, and also highlights the idea placed in the independent clause**.

Generally, writers place the ideas they consider important in main clauses, and other ideas go into dependent clauses. For example:

*Melissa was reading a detective story* ***when*** *TWA Flight 800 crashed into Long Island Sound.*

Everyone knows that the crash of TWA Flight 800 is more noteworthy than Melissa’s reading of the detective story. However, the sentence concerns Melissa, not the plane crash, and so the fact that she was reading is stated in the main clause, while the crash is subordinated in a dependent clause.

However, if a different clause is subordinated:

*TWA Flight 800 crashed into Long Island Sound* ***while*** *Melissa was reading a detective story.*

Suddenly the TWA flight becomes the noteworthy part of the sentence.

**Placement and Arrangement**

The placement of the most important words, phrases, and clauses at the beginning or end of a sentence is another way a writer can achieve emphasis.

**Periodic Sentence**:

The ending is the most important part of a sentence; the beginning is less important; and the middle is the least important of all.

*Its feet pounding the ground, its talons scraping the stone walls, its eyes glaring menacingly, its mouth watering hungrily, down the hallway came the dragon.*

* **Why use a periodic sentence?** By holding the main clause back, the author keeps his readers in suspense and so places the most emphasis possible on his main idea.

**A cumulative (loose) sentence**, on the other hand, states its main idea at the beginning and then adds details in the following phrases and clauses. Rewritten as a loose sentence, the previous example might read like this:

*The dragon came down the hallway, its feet pounding the ground, its talons scraping the stone walls, its eyes glaring menacingly, its mouth watering hungrily.*

* **Why use a cumulative sentence?** The main idea still gets plenty of emphasis, since it is contained in a main clause at the beginning of the sentence. A loose sentence resembles the way people talk: it flows naturally and is easy to understand.

**A centered sentence** states its main idea in the middle of the sentence, achieving the least emphasis possible for the writer’s central point.

*Its feet pounding the ground, its talons scraping the stone walls, the dragon came down the hallway, its eyes glaring menacingly, its mouth watering hungrily.*

* **Why use a centered sentence?** The most important part of the sentence is effectively buried, often creating a feeling of understatement.