WRITING CENTER WORKSHOP ON IMPROVING SENTENCE VARIETY

Short sentences can be effective because they are direct and dramatic. They can stress an important fact or idea readers can easily understand and remember.

Her career is finished.
The jury voted guilty.
Never swim alone.

Too many short sentences, however, can make writing choppy and hard to understand because instead of connecting ideas to create a train of thought, they become a list of separate statements.

Choppy – Mayor Beam is running for reelection. He is seeking a third term. He faces a tough campaign. He is running against Elizabeth Holzer. She is a popular businesswoman. She owns the Hotel Metro. She built several condos downtown.

Improved – Mayor Beam is running for reelection, seeking a third term. He faces a tough campaign against Elizabeth Holzer, a popular businesswoman. She owns the Hotel Metro and has built several condos downtown.

1. You can reduce choppy writing by joining short, related sentences that better demonstrate the relationship of ideas.

Choppy – Talk shows dominate afternoon TV. Soap operas remain popular. They have had to change. The shows have to appeal to a younger generation. Soap stars now portray professional women. They also portray single mothers.

Improved – Talk shows dominate afternoon TV although soap operas remain somewhat popular. They have had to change to appeal to a younger generation. Soap stars now portray professional women and single mothers.

VARY SENTENCE OPENINGS

An effective way to increase sentence variety is to alter the common subject-verb-object pattern of most sentences.

Predictable (and boring!) – Most people in Detroit are unaware of the vast network of streets a thousand feet under them. These streets are as wide as four-lane highways. Truck headlights shine eerily as they illuminate the dazzling white floors, walls, and ceiling of this strange underground city. Detroiter worked above ground making cars. Other Detroiter toiled invisibly beneath them digging and blasting salt. Scientists estimated there is enough salt to operate the Detroit mines for millions of years. The mines closed in 1983. They were unable to compete with cheaper salt from Canada.
2. Opening sentences with \textit{adverbs} can break up the monotony of standard sentence patterns and make writing more lively and interesting.

Most people in Detroit are unaware of the vast network of streets a thousand feet under them. These streets are as wide as four-lane highways. Eerily shining, truck headlights illuminate the dazzling white floors, walls, and ceilings of this strange underground city. Detroiters worked aboveground making cars. \textit{Invisibly} toiling beneath them, other Detroiters dug and blasted salt. Scientists estimated there is enough salt to operate the Detroit mines for millions of years. \textit{Surprisingly}, the mines closed in 1983. They were unable to compete with cheaper salt from Canada.

3. Another way to vary sentence beginnings is through the use of \textit{prepositional phrases} (often set off by commas).

\textbf{He went to New York without a dollar in his pocket.}  
\textbf{Without a dollar in his pocket, he went to New York.}

\textbf{She collapsed from exhaustion on a public-speaking tour in New Mexico.}  
\textbf{On a public speaking tour in New Mexico, she collapsed from exhaustion.}

4. You may also combine sentences with \textit{present participles}. Present participles are \textit{-ing} verbs like \textit{running}, \textit{standing}, \textit{selling}, \textit{dancing}, or \textit{thinking}. You can join two related sentences by turning the verb of one sentence into an \textit{-ing} verb to open a sentence combining the ideas of both. This method can reduce repetition and wordiness and create a more lively sentence pattern.

\textbf{Monotonous -} I worked all night. I was exhausted by noon.  
The car failed to start. The car was towed to the garage.  
Sara studied for hours. She was determined to pass.

\textbf{Improved -} \textbf{Working} all night, I was exhausted by noon.  
\textbf{Falling} to start, the car was towed to the garage.  
\textbf{Studying} for hours, Sara was determined to pass.

5. Another effective way of increasing sentence variety and reducing repetitive statements is to create compound subjects and verbs to combine related sentences.

\textbf{Yale is a famous Ivy League university. Harvard is also a famous Ivy League school.}  
\textbf{Yale and Harvard are famous Ivy League universities.} (compound subject)

\textbf{The company sold computers. It also serviced copiers.}  
\textbf{The company sold computers and serviced copiers.} (compound verb)

\textbf{The company sells computers, but it does not have a service department.} (compound sentence)
6. You may also avoid choppy, repetitive writing by combining sentences by turning one of them into an appositive, a word or phrase that describes, defines, or adds information about a noun or pronoun.

Choppy – MIT is a major research university. It is conducting the laser experiments.
Improved - MIT, a major research university, is conducting the laser experiments.

Choppy – Penicillin is one of the oldest antibiotics. It is losing its ability to kill many germs.
Improved – Penicillin, one of the oldest antibiotics, is losing its ability to kill many germs.

7. You can combine related sentences by turning one of them into a relative clause. Relative clauses begin with which, who, or that and describe or define a noun or pronoun. Relative clauses not only reduce choppy sentences but also more clearly express what you are trying to say by emphasizing main ideas.

Choppy - Kim Hsu only speaks Korean. She is nominated for a special effects award.
Improved - Kim Hsu, who only speaks Korean, is nominated for a special effects award.

Choppy - Brighton College is located in Maine. The college specializes in oceanography.
Improved – Brighton College, which is located in Maine, specializes in oceanography.

Exercise

Revise this e-mail to reduce choppy and repetitive sentences.

ATTN: Clerical Staff

RE: Patient Records

State law requires total patient confidentiality. We do not release records to patient families. We do not release records to insurance companies. These records contain person information. These records contain sensitive material.

If people call asking for records, tell them you can refer the request to the clinic director. If people email asking for records, tell them the same thing.

Do not answer any questions about a patient’s health. Do not answer any questions about which doctor a patient is seeing. It is important to be polite. It is important to maintain a professional attitude. Explain that you are not allowed to release patient information of any kind. Explain that you can pass requests on to the clinic director.

If you have any questions, call me at ext. 287.

John Jones
Chapter review: Sentence variety

Revise the following passage for variety and emphasis using the strategies presented in this chapter.

The United Nations was established in 1945. It was intended to prevent another world war. It began with twenty-one members. Nearly every nation in the world belongs to the United Nations today.

The United Nations has four purposes, according to its charter. One purpose is to maintain international peace and security. Another is to develop friendly relations among nations. Another is to promote cooperation among nations in solving international problems and in promoting respect for human rights. Last is to provide a forum for harmonizing the actions of nations.

All of the members of the United Nations have a seat in the General Assembly. The General Assembly considers numerous topics. These topics include globalization, AIDS, and pollution. Every member has a vote in the General Assembly.

A smaller group within the United Nations has the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. This group is called the Security Council. The Security Council has five permanent members. They are China, France, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The Security Council also has ten elected members. The General Assembly elects the members of the Security Council. The elected members serve for two-year terms.