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Fall 2018 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

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Instructor's name Kacie Armstrong

Dept & Course # PSYC1140 Course title Promoting Progress through Psychology

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Sentence Structure Variation

Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature Kacie Armstrong Date 12/17/18

Abstract

This exercise was designed to help students understand the importance of sentence structure variation. A model passage was used to dissect and evaluate sentence structure variety, and then students practiced this skill in their own writing. Ultimately, students learned to vary sentence structure in order to achieve the quick pacing and rhythmic structure that is characteristic of editorial writing.

Keywords: sentence structure, pacing, style, editorial

Exercise Rationale

This exercise was completed about two-thirds of the way through the semester, after students had worked almost exclusively on broader writing skills (e.g., writing an introduction and conclusion, supporting an argument with empirical evidence, etc.). At this point, our focus shifted to the fine-tuning of writing. I focused on sentence structure variety because many of my students had little experience with editorial writing, and they were working on an op-ed for their final writing assignment. Critically, op-eds often rely on sentence variation to achieve the quick pacing that is characteristic of their structure.

Given that we had been discussing the topic of moral dilemmas, I first asked students to dissect a passage on the Trolley Problem in psychology. This passage served two purposes: 1) to summarize and offer a different perspective on a previously discussed topic, and 2) to provide students with a chance to evaluate sentence structure variety in a published editorial piece. They worked both independently and in small groups to locate areas within the passage where sentence structure was varied, and how this variation was or was not effective. We then discussed their responses as a large group.

Then, having developed an understanding of sentence structure variety, I asked students to practice this skill in their own writing. We had been discussing the importance of calls to action in editorial writing, so I sharpened the focus of this activity by asking students to write a draft conclusion for their op-eds that included a call to action that was clear, relevant, and specific (the three attributes that they, in a previous class, had collectively decided are vital to effective calls to action). There was a catch, however: I assigned each student three different rules (from the list on page 4), and they were tasked with incorporating each rule into a separate sentence within their paragraph. (To assign these rules, I simply asked each student to randomly choose a slip of paper with a set of three rules out of a bag). Students were also provided with the attached “Sentence Variation Guide” to which they could refer as they constructed their sentences.

While I did not collect students’ work at the end of class, I did include a section on sentence structure variety in the peer revision packets that they later completed as they reviewed each other’s drafts. I also incorporated sentence structure variety into the grading rubric for their final op-eds.

Students seemed to enjoy this assignment, and I noticed that many of them took these skills to heart as they completed their op-eds. For instance, they learned to use short sentences effectively (i.e., to make a strong point), and they learned to begin sentences with adverbs and adjectives in order to vary the wording of sentence openings (as many students had been in the habit of beginning sequential sentences with the same word or phrase). In addition, students who previously had trouble with run-on sentences were equipped to revise such sentences by using the skills acquired in this exercise.

Sentence Structure Variation

Adding variety to sentence structure gives rhythm to your writing. On the other hand, too many sentences of the same structure and length can be repetitive and boring for your readers. This task will enable you to vary your sentence structure as you work on your Op-Eds.

Part 1: Dissecting Sentence Structure (15 minutes)

Read the passage below from “The Trolley Problem Will Tell You Nothing Useful about Morality” by Brianna Rennix & Nathan J. Robinson. Then, consider the ways in which the authors vary their sentence structure throughout the passage. For instance, do certain sentences begin with a particular part of speech or type of phrase? Is punctuation used in an interesting way? Are the sentences long and complex, or short and to the point? Underline 3-5 sentences that you feel best add to the variety of sentence structure throughout this passage.

You are on an asteroid careening through the cosmos. Aboard the asteroid with you are nine hundred highly-skilled physicians, who have been working on developing a revolutionary medication that will cure every disease in the known universe. The asteroid’s current trajectory is taking it straight toward the Planet of Orphans, where all intergalactic civilizations have dumped their unwanted offspring, of which there are now 100 trillion, all living, breathing, and mewling. If you detonate the asteroid, all of the doctors will die, along with the hope for curing every disease in the universe. If you do not detonate the asteroid, the doctors will have time to develop the cure and send it hurtling toward the Healing Planet before you crash into and destroy the Planet of Orphans. Thus you face the crucial question: how useful is this hypothetical for illuminating moral truths?

The “Trolley Problem” is a staple of undergraduate moral philosophy. It is a gruesome hypothetical supposedly designed to test our moral intuitions and introduce the differences between Kantian and consequentialist reasoning. For the lucky few who have thus far managed to avoid exposure to the Trolley Problem, here it is: a runaway trolley is hurtling down the track. In the trolley’s path are five workers, who will inevitably be smushed to a gory paste if it continues along its present course. But you, you have the power to change things: you happen to be standing by a switch. If you give the switch a yank, the trolley will veer onto a different track. On this track, there is only one worker. Do you pull the switch and doom the unsuspecting proletarian, or do you refrain from acting and allow five others to die?

Most people announce that they would pull the switch, thus extinguishing one life instead of five. But usually someone in the class will dissent, and say that pulling the switch is wrong because there is a difference between killing someone intentionally versus letting them die through circumstances beyond your control. A discussion will ensue about the action/inaction distinction. Then variants will be introduced: what if you could save the five people by pushing an obese man in front of the trolley? What if the obese man was evil? This leads to further scenarios: what if you were a doctor in a remote country who could save five dying people by killing one and harvesting his organs? What if you were part of a group of Jews hiding in a basement in 1941 while the Gestapo searched your house, and your baby started to cry—would you be justified in smothering it to death to save a dozen others? (Existential Comics has nicely

lampooned the tendency of trolley hypotheticals to quickly spiral out of control with more and more elaborate sets of conditions and caveats.)

If all of this sounds incredibly stupid, with no obvious relationship to any moral problem that an ordinary human is likely to encounter, that's because it is. And yet it is an "iconic philosophical thought experiment," one which "has occupied the attention of brilliant minds, from academic ethicists to moral psychologists to engineers." In psychology, literally hundreds of studies have tested people's responses to the trolley problem with the aim of usefully understanding human moral intuition. On social media, trolley problem memes have even become unexpectedly popular.

The persistence of the trolley problem in philosophy and psychology tells us a lot more about the state of those fields than it does about ourselves and our moral choices. Here we have a hypothetical that is essentially on par with *The Asteroid* And *The Orphans*, being treated as a helpful window into moral questions.

It's very obvious what would happen if any of us ever encountered a "trolley problem" in real life. We would panic, do something rashly, and then watch in horror as one or more persons died a gruesome death before our eyes. We would probably end up with PTSD. Whatever we had ended up doing in the moment, we would probably feel guilty about for the rest of our lives: even if we had somehow miraculously managed to comply with a consistent set of consequentialist ethics, this would bring us little comfort. In fact, the total lack of insight that a real-world trolley problem would provide is illustrated well in this scene from NBC's *The Good Place*. Michael, a demon taking an ethics course, decides that he could better understand the trolley problem if it were less abstract, and plunges his bewildered professor into a realistic version of the scenario, an actual trolley rattling toward five oblivious track-repairmen. What happens, predictably, is panic followed by horror followed by the spattering of guts. "What did we learn?" Michael says to his blood-soaked teacher after the trolley has come to a stop. The answer, as we can all see, is nothing.

Part 2: Small Group Discussion (5 minutes)

In groups of two or three, discuss which sentences you underlined and why. (Take note of any sentences that more than one person underlined.) Based on your responses, share ideas about how you can vary sentence structure as you draft your Op-Ed.

Part 3: Practicing Sentence Variation (25 minutes)

Write a concluding paragraph for your op-ed that does the following:

- Speculates about the potential social consequences surrounding the topic you are tackling (if nothing were to change)
- Use this speculation as a platform to propose a clear, relevant, and specific call to action.

For the purposes of this task, you should focus on incorporating **variety into your sentence structure**. As such, you will be assigned three "rules" dictating various types of sentences that should be included in your paragraph. Refer to the attached guide for tips on how to implement these rules.

Rules:

- Simple sentence
- Compound sentence
- Complex sentence
- Compound-complex sentence
- Short sentence (less than 10 words)
- Long sentence (more than 20 words)
- Begin a sentence with an adjective
- Begin a sentence with an adverb
- Begin a sentence with a prepositional phrase
- Begin a sentence with a verbal phrase
- Front loaded sentence
- End loaded sentence

Sentence Variation Guide

Simple sentences contain a subject and a verb and express one complete thought.

- A simple sentence does not necessarily have to be short. It can contain adjectives, prepositional phrases, and more than one subject and verb.
- Example: The full moon triggers outrageous behavior among the people of Ithaca.

Compound sentences contain two independent clauses. An independent clause is part of a sentence that can stand alone because it contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. Essentially, a compound sentence contains two simple sentences.

- These independent clauses are joined by a **conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so)**.
- Example: The full moon triggers outrageous behavior among the people of Ithaca, **and** this behavior is most severe in the winter.

Complex sentences contain an independent clause joined by one or more dependent clauses. A dependent clause either lacks a subject or a verb or contains both a subject and a verb but does not express a complete thought.

- Independent and dependent clauses are linked by a **subordinator (as, because, since, after, although, when)** or **relative pronoun (who, that, which)**.
- Example: **Because** tonight's full moon is expected to be the worst of all time, the police are out in full force.

Compound-complex sentences contain two independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.

- Example: **Because** tonight's full moon is expected to be the worst of all time, the police are out in full force, **and** the National Guard is on alert.

Each of the sentence types listed above can be further varied using the following techniques:

Vary sentence length. Long sentences work well for incorporating a lot of information, and short sentences can emphasize crucial points. If you have a series of short, repetitive sentences, you can connect them with conjunctions or semicolons.

- Example: The moon is out. It is full. I am frightened.
- Becomes: The moon is out, **and** it appears to be full; **therefore**, I am frightened.

Either **front load or end load sentences**. Front loaded sentences present the subject and verb first, followed by modifying phrases.

- Example: **The full moon causes outrageous behavior** including crime, mischief, friskiness, and reckless spending.

End loaded sentences create emphasis by placing the subject and verb at the end.

- Example: Known to transform upstanding citizens into rogues and to incite social destruction, **the full moon has earned itself a terrible reputation.**

Other techniques help to ensure that multiple sentences do not begin with the same word or phrase (e.g., “This is because....” “This is in response to....”):

Begin sentences with adverbs.

- Example: **Strangely**, residents of New York City seem to be impervious to the power of the full moon.

Begin sentences with adjectives.

- Example: **Full and exceptionally bright**, tonight’s moon will surely wreak havoc on society.

Begin sentences with prepositional phrases.

- Example: **In the middle of the night**, the full moon is at its most powerful.

Begin sentences with verbal phrases.

- Example: **Worried that the full moon would kill him**, Charlie barricaded himself in the basement.
- Or: **Charlie, worried that the full moon would kill him**, barricaded himself in the basement.