

Sentences Classified by Grammatical Structure

Sentences are classified on the basis of *grammatical structure* as:

1. simple,
2. compound,
3. complex, and
4. compound-complex.

All these types are used in good composition, but not indiscriminately. The structure should be not only correct but also appropriate for the particular idea being transmitted. If the idea is characterized by its singleness, for example, the appropriate grammatical form would be one independent clause (simple sentence). On the other hand, if the idea has a dual nature (for instance, if it is made up of two opposing or two complementary aspects of thought), the proper structure would be a pair of independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction that helps to clarify the relationship (compound sentence).

1. Simple Sentences

A *simple sentence* consists of only one independent clause; that is, one subject and one predicate (verb and complement), either or both of which may be compound.

e.g. The children played games. S.V.

(The sentence has a single subject, *children*, and a single predicate, *played games*.)

e.g. The children and the parents played games. S.S.V.

(The sentence has a compound subject, *children and parents*, and a single predicate, *played games*.)

e.g. The children played games and sang songs. S.V.V.

(The sentence has a single subject, *children*, and a compound predicate, *played games and sang songs*.)

e.g. The children and the parents played games and sang songs. S.S.V.V.

(Here both the subject, *children and parents*, and the predicate, *played games and sang ballads*, are compound; but the singleness of idea is maintained because the children and the parents formed one group and did the same thing at the same time.)

2. Compound Sentences

A *compound sentence* consists of two or more independent clauses. Ordinarily a coordinating conjunction joins the independent clauses. A comma comes before the coordinating conjunction when:

- the subjects of the clauses differ,
- when the coordinating conjunction shows contrast, or
- when the clauses are fairly long.

e.g. The children played games, and the parents sang songs.

(The two clauses show that two separate groups did different things. The comma is used because the subjects of the clauses are different.)

e.g. The sky darkened, but no rain fell.

(Two events are recorded here, one affirmatively, one negatively. The comma is used with *but* to show contrast.)

e.g. Many animals were in hibernation, for winter had already begun.

(The clauses state two facts that have a cause-and-effect relationship. The comma shows that *for* is a coordinating conjunction at the beginning of a new clause and prevents the reader's mistaking *for* as a preposition.)

****If no coordinating conjunction joins the independent clauses, a semicolon usually separates them.**

e.g. The committee met in closed sessions; it later published its findings.

(The clauses relate two successive stages of action. The semicolon is necessary because no coordinating conjunction joins the clauses.)

e.g. The action throughout the story shows the main character struggling against an indifferent environment; furthermore, the end of the story shows that his struggle was futile.

(The semicolon is necessary because the connecting word, *furthermore*, is a conjunctive adverb, not a coordinating conjunction.)

****When the first clause of a compound sentence is a general introduction to a second clause that provides specific meaning, a colon serves better than a semicolon between the clauses.**

He felt that he was facing a dilemma: his choice was between deceiving his brother and offending his sister.

(Here the second clause explains the first. The colon helps the reader to expect an explanation.)

3. *Complex Sentences*

A *complex sentence* consists of one independent and one or more dependent clauses. A young child puts almost all his thoughts into simple and compound sentences because he has not had enough discipline in thinking to recognize logical interrelationships. A small boy may report (in four independent clauses):

“Tommy comes over to my yard on Saturdays, and he brings his baseball and glove, and we play catch, and we have fun.”

** If he were to describe the same experience after he is a few years older, he would probably say (in one dependent and one independent clause):

“When Tommy came over to my yard on Saturdays with his baseball and glove, we had fun playing catch.”

Whereas the former version, a long compound sentence, makes the four successive, loosely related ideas seem equally important, the latter version, a complex sentence, reserves the emphasis for the idea in the main clause, *we had fun playing catch*, and points out a time relationship between that idea and the one in the dependent clause. Here are additional examples of the complex sentence.

e.g. The girls chatted until they fell asleep. (*The girl* chatted* is the independent clause. The dependent clause, *until they fell asleep*, is an adverbial clause modifying the verb *chatted* and pointing out a time limitation.)

e.g. The property owners who live in the suburb are opposing the plan for commercial zoning there.

(The property owners are opposing the plan for commercial zoning there is the independent clause. The dependent clause, who live in the suburb, is an adjective clause modifying and restricting the noun *owners*).

e.g. What the message meant remained a puzzle. (Here the whole sentence is the independent clause.

(*What the message meant* is a noun clause functioning as the subject of the verb *remained* in the independent clause.)

4. Compound-Complex Sentences

As its name indicates, a *compound- complex sentence* consists of two or more independent clauses (to make it compound) and one or more dependent clauses (to make it complex as well).

e.g. Soames Forsyte is the main character in Galsworthy's novel *The Man of Property*; Soames remains a character in some of the later stories which Galsworthy included in *The Forsyte Saga*.

** (The sentence contains two independent clauses separated by the semicolon. It also contains an adjective clause, the last seven words of the sentence, beginning with *which* and modifying the noun *stories*.)

e.g. The scientist knew that his experiment would succeed, but he avoided publicity until the final test was complete.

(This sentence contains two independent clauses separated by the comma and joined by the coordinating conjunction *but*. The sentence also contains two dependent clauses: a noun clause, *that his experiment would succeed*, is the direct object of the verb *knew*; and an adverbial clause, *until the final test was complete*, modifies the verb *avoided*.)

Sentences Classified by Rhetorical Form.

Rhetorical form here means the design or style that determines the effect of the sentence on the reader. The sentence may have the necessary grammatical elements, even the appropriate number of independent and dependent clauses for the idea, and yet startle or distract the reader. If it does, its rhetorical form is poor. The sentence elements need to be controlled and grouped, the words chosen and arranged, so that the effect on the reader is as pleasing as possible. A sentence, like a well-designed building, can have an element of grace, of natural harmony. If it does, its rhetorical form is good.

Sentences are classified on the basis of *rhetorical form* as:

1. loose,
2. balanced, and
3. periodic sentences.

The specific basis of this classification is the order in which the sentence elements are arranged. None of the sentences in this category is in itself better than the others. All three types are used in an interesting variety by competent writers.

1. Loose Sentences

A *loose sentence* is one in which the grammatical elements are arranged so that the main structure is complete before the end. The loose sentence has the effect of relaxing the reader, of helping him to grasp early the essence of the idea.

e.g. Grandmother was always pleased when her grandchildren came to visit her, especially when they came uninvited.

2. Balanced Sentences

A *balanced sentence* is a compound or compound-complex sentence in which the structure is parallel or nearly so. An important requirement is that the ideas be sufficiently similar or dissimilar to lend themselves to parallel structure. If its content is suited to its form, an occasional balanced sentence has almost certain appeal. It has the effect of temporarily satisfying the reader's fundamental need for symmetry.

e.g. When I want companionship, I visit with a friend or two in a quiet retreat; when I want solitude, I merge with a crowd of strangers in a noisy metropolis.

Sometimes the effect of balance is sustained throughout a series of sentences, as in this passage.

e.g. The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has got a fine Geneva watch, but he has lost the skill to tell the hour by the sun.

3. *Periodic Sentences*

Unlike a loose or a balanced sentence, a *periodic sentence* is one in which grammatical structure becomes complete only with the last word. It has the effect of suspense, of making the reader wait as long as possible to know what the sentence means. In a short periodic sentence like “Let there be light,” the suspense does not tax the reader. A long periodic sentence requires him to keep subordinate points in mind until he reaches the climax at the end. For this reason, long periodic sentences should be used infrequently. Here are examples of varying length.

e.g. The tree that we planted last fall does not seem to be growing.

e.g. When the battle was over, neither of the two armies was able to call itself victorious.

e.g. During his first year in the one-room school, when he tried unsuccessfully to join the older boys at play, and when his efforts in reading and writing were often a source of merriment for them, Tim began to stutter.

As mentioned earlier, rhetorical form in the sentence is a matter of architecture. Certain basic patterns have been established and accepted, but they permit unlimited variety. The important thing for the writer—the architect of the composition—to remember is that by skillfully interspersing among his loose, casual structures a number of balanced, symmetrical units and a few carefully styled ones of varying sizes, he can create effective design in his organic whole composition.