

## VARIETY IN SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Taken from *THE LIVELY ART OF WRITING* by Lucile Vaughan Payne  
Loose Sentence, Periodic Sentence, Combination Sentence, Expanding subject, verb, and object, Exercises

**Two sentence patterns are of major importance:**

- The Loose Sentence
- The Periodic Sentence

Every sentence in the English language will fit into one of these categories or will be a combination of both. Once you understand the two patterns, you can write any kind of sentence you like without the slightest fear of going astray.

**You can master these patterns easily if you first get a grip on one important principle: The principle of the basic statement (main idea).**

The following are basic statements:

1. **Bells rang.**
2. **Love is blind.**
3. **The cat scratched Sally.**
4. **John gave his mother flowers.**
5. **The teacher considered him a good student.**

Every English sentence contains a basic statement. It may stand alone as one short sentence as in the examples above, or it may be buried inside a longer sentence. It is the kernel that you have left after you chop away everything in a sentence except its essential meaning; it is the kernel you build on when you want to make a sentence longer.

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THE LOOSE SENTENCE: This sentence is a basic statement with a string of details added to it.

**Basic statement:** **Bells rang.**

**Loose sentence:** **Bells rang**, filling the air with their clangor, startling pigeons into flight from every belfry, bringing people into the streets to hear the news.

**Basic statement:** The teacher considered him a good student.

**Loose sentence:** **The teacher considered him a good student**; steady if not inspired, willing if not eager, responsive to instruction and conscientious about his work.

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THE PERIODIC SENTENCE: In this sentence, additional details are placed before the basic statement. Delay, of course, is the secret weapon of the periodic sentence.

**Basic statement: John gave his mother flowers.**

**Periodic sentence: John**, the tough one, the sullen kid who scoffed at any show of sentiment, **gave his mother flowers.**

**Basic statement: The cat scratched Sally.**

**Periodic sentence:** Suddenly, for no apparent reason, **the loveable cat scratched Sally.**

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THE PERIODIC (INTERRUPTIVE): In this sentence, additional details are added inside the basic statement:

**Basic statement: Love is blind.**

**Periodic sentence: Love**, as everyone knows except those who happen to be afflicted with it, **is blind.**

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THE COMBINATION: In this sentence, additional details are added before and after the basic statement.

Once you have learned to recognize and use the two major sentence patterns, you can forget about adhering to them strickly. You can combine elements of both if you wish.

Suppose you are working with a short, simple sentence--A sentence reduced to the barest basic statement: **John was angry.**

This short sentence may sound exactly right inside your paragraph--just short enough and sharp enough to have the force you want. In that case, leave it alone. But perhaps that nagging inner ear tells you that it isn't quite right; it needs something. Thus, you make it a shade more periodic:

**John was** suddenly, violently **angry.**

Or you make it even more periodic:

**John**, usually the calmest of men, **was** suddenly, violently **angry.**

Or you decide to add detail at the end:

**John**, usually the calmest of men, **was** suddenly, violently **angry**, so angry that he lost control completely.

Now the sentence is both periodic and loose. You could shake it up still more by moving some of the detail up front:

Usually the calmest of men, **John was** suddenly, violently **angry**, so angry that he lost control completely.

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EXPANDING THE SUBJECT, VERB, AND OBJECT

Periodic structures usually expand the subject or verb. Loose structures expand the verb or object.

### **Expanding the Subject:**

The easiest way to start the details flowing is to think of the subject as being followed by a pause. Make yourself hear that pause. It is exactly the same kind of pause that occurs in your own conversation every day, in sentences like the following. Notice these sentences are periodic (interruptive) and they expand the subjects.

**That boy, the one wearing glasses, is in my history class.**

**This piecrust, tough as it is, tastes pretty good.**

Here's another example: **The class (pause) read the assignment.**

**The class, a mixture of juniors and seniors in advanced math, read the assignment.**

**The class, usually noisy and inattentive, read the assignment.**

**The class, with a subdued rustle of books and papers, read the assignment.**

When expanding the subject, consider these methods of expansion: description, appositive, adjective, prepositional phrase, participles, etc.

### **Expanding the Verb:**

Expand the verb by showing how its action progresses. Any phrase that tells how or when a verb acts is related grammatically to the verb.

**The class read, listlessly at first, and then with growing interest, the assignment.**

**The class read, after trying unsuccessfully to divert the instructor, the assignment.**

### **Expanding the Object (or the rest of the sentence):**

**The class read the assignment, a full chapter.**

**I saw Mr. Hassenfeffer, the instructor.**

**The class read the assignment, a full chapter, with a dismaying number of difficult-looking statistical tables.**

**I saw Mr. Hassenfeffer, the instructor, flat-nosed, beady-eyes, on guard every minute.**

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Remember, written sentences should have the sound of speech--intelligent, highly ordered speech that sounds completely natural to the listening inner ear of the reader. The means to this naturalness is through variety in sentence patterns: basic statements, loose (cumulative) sentences, periodic sentences, combinations. By learning to add detail in various ways to a basic statement, you can create any of these patterns; by alternating them, by striving consciously for variety, by listening to your sentences as well

as looking at them, you can create the natural cadence of the human voice. The big obstacle that most student writers must overcome is the conviction that any sentence, once written, is an immovable and unchangeable object, like a chunk of concrete or an engraving on steel. Remember, a sentence is a thing of movable parts, an endlessly adaptable structure that is completely subject to the writer's will, shrinking or expanding to fit the sound and sense he or she chooses to give it.

So relax, loosen up. Play boldly with sentences. Combine, convert, shift, change, add, subtract, divide, multiply. Take chances. The more you experiment, the more you will learn.

## PRACTICE

Write a loose (cumulative) sentence at least twenty words long using each of the basic statements. Do not change the basic statement; just add to it.

- The moon rose.

- \_\_\_\_\_

- The man was dead.

- \_\_\_\_\_

- She liked the song.

- \_\_\_\_\_

- They had a good time.

- \_\_\_\_\_

Using the following basic statements, write four periodic sentences at least fifteen words long:

- Mary left the room.

- \_\_\_\_\_

- Hate is based on fear.

- \_\_\_\_\_

- The man was dead.

- \_\_\_\_\_

- The circus was his life.

- \_\_\_\_\_

Select four of the eight sentences you have just written and add details that will make each one a combination of the loose and the periodic.

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Expand the subject on the sentence below:

- The old man shuffled out of sight.

- \_\_\_\_\_

Expand the verb of each of the following sentences.

- The girl walked across the playground.

- \_\_\_\_\_

- The boy talked about fishing.

- \_\_\_\_\_

Add a simple appositive to the noun at the end of each sentence below:

- He liked the car.

- \_\_\_\_\_

- John read the book.

- \_\_\_\_\_

- They listened to the lecture.

- \_\_\_\_\_

- He called the dog.

- \_\_\_\_\_

Using prepositional phrases and participles, add detail to each of the appositives in the four sentences you have just written. Make each sentence at least fifteen words long.

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