

Understanding Sentence Fluency

Strong writing is seamless—meaning that the sentences are easy to follow from start to finish. To ensure this seamless style, William Zinsser says that he writes “entirely by ear, reading everything aloud before letting it go out into the world.”

■ Check for variety.

In effective writing, the sentences are not predictable. They vary in the way they begin, in length, and in verb choice. Use the following strategy to ensure sentence variety in your writing.

1. In one column on a piece of paper, list each sentence's opening word. (Decide if you need to vary some sentence beginnings.)
2. In another column, write the number of words in each sentence. (Decide if you need to change the length of some sentences.)
3. In a third column, list the verbs in each sentence. (Decide if you need to change any general verbs—*is*, *are*, *look*, and so on.)

Sample Paragraph

Read the following brief paragraph, paying careful attention to the flow of the sentences.

Bold Buildup

The lights dimmed in the amphitheater. Multicolored spotlights danced overhead, bouncing off the ceiling. Bold sounds grew in intensity. At first, the sounds thundered in the distance, but soon they roared in our heads. People all around stamped their feet and clapped their hands. Blasts from a bass guitar drowned out the fans. Behind a blinding flash of light, the band appeared on stage. At last, the concert began.



Respond to the reading. On your own paper, use the three-step strategy above to test the sentences in the sample paragraph.



Try It!

Write freely for 5 to 10 minutes about a concert or sporting event you have attended. Then test your sentence variety using the strategy above.

■ Add style to your sentences.

You can learn about sentence style by examining the sentences in professional essays, articles, and stories. Experienced writers often use *loose* and *cumulative* sentences.

- A **loose sentence** expresses the main idea near the beginning (in blue below) and adds details as needed.

The regimental flags led, men trailing out behind each flag in a V-shaped mass, struggling over rocks and logs.

—"Missionary Ridge," Bruce Catton

- A **cumulative sentence** places the main idea in the middle (in blue below) with modifiers coming before and after it.

Each afternoon during the wonderful spring, I had to stay in, two hours a day for six weeks, working long division.

—*Good Old Boy*, Willie Morris

Try It!

Write sentences modeled after each example below. (You do not have to follow the examples exactly.) One sentence has been modeled for you.

Wil nodded to himself and slipped away, softly as a mouse, toward the back of the house where the tourists were never taken.

—"A Room Full of Leaves," Joan Aiken

Student Version: Josie smiled to herself and jogged along, gracefully as a deer, toward the pond in the park where many ducks were always feeding.

He was born around 1840, by the Belle Fourche River, near Bear Butte, in what is now South Dakota.

—*Crazy Horse*, Larry McMurtry

I spent hours in the bedroom playing with the set, studying the directions, and working one experiment after another.

—*Gifted Hands*, Ben Carson

Born in 1927, my mother, Johnny Florence Gooch, was her mother's right hand, just as I am to her.

—*An American Story*, Debra J. Dickerson

Creeping through her bones, the pain had become insistent, nearly without letup.

—*A Tidewater Morning*, William Styron