Improving Sentence Style

In addition to combining some sentences, you can also make your writing more effective by revising stringy and wordy sentences to make them shorter and clearer. Your reader will stay involved if you mix long and short sentences and include simple, compound, and complex sentences in your writing.

Revising Stringy Sentences

A stringy sentence is made up of several complete thoughts strung together with words like and or but. Stringy sentences just ramble on and on. They don’t give the reader a chance to pause before each new idea.

To fix a stringy sentence, you can

- break the sentence into two or more sentences
- turn some of the complete thoughts into phrases or subordinate clauses

STRINGY Martina climbed the stairs of the haunted house, and she knocked on the door several times, but no one answered, and she braced herself, and then she opened the door.

REVISED Martina climbed the stairs of the haunted house. She knocked on the door several times, but no one answered. Bracing herself, she opened the door.

When you revise a stringy sentence, you may decide to keep and or but between two closely related independent clauses. If you do this, be sure to use a comma before the and or but.

EXAMPLE She knocked on the door several times, but no one answered.

Exercise 9 Revising Stringy Sentences

Some of the following sentences are stringy and need to be improved. First, identify the stringy sentences. Then, revise them by (1) breaking each sentence into two or more sentences or (2) turning some of the complete thoughts into phrases or subordinate clauses. If the sentence is effective and does not need to be improved, write C for correct.
1. Mercedes O. Cubría was born in Cuba, but her mother died, and she moved to the United States, and she moved with her two sisters.
2. She worked as a nurse, and then she joined the Women’s Army Corps, and she soon became an officer in the army.
3. Cubría was the first Cuban-born woman to become an officer in the U.S. Army.
4. Her job during World War II was to translate important government papers into a secret code.
5. The war ended, and she was promoted to captain, and later her official rank rose to major.
6. Then there was the Korean War, and she worked as an intelligence officer, and she studied information about the enemy.
7. Cubría retired from the army in 1953 but was called to duty again in 1962.
8. After the Castro revolution, thousands of Cubans fled to the United States, and Cubría interviewed many of these refugees, and she also prepared reports on Cuba.
9. In her spare time, she helped people from Cuba find jobs and housing.
10. She retired again in 1973, and she settled in Miami, Florida, and she was surrounded by friends and family there.

**Revising Wordy Sentences**

Sometimes you use more words in a sentence than you really need. Extra words do not make writing sound better and, in fact, they can even interfere with your message. Revise *wordy sentences* in these three ways.

1. Replace a phrase with one word.

   **WORDY** In a state of exhaustion, Tony slumped across the bus seat and fell asleep.
   **REVISED** Exhausted, Tony slumped across the bus seat and fell asleep.

   **WORDY** As a result of what happened when the tire went flat, we were late.
   **REVISED** Because the tire went flat, we were late.
2. Take out who is or which is.

WORDY  Yesterday I went for a long hike with Sonya, who is my best friend.

REVISED Yesterday I went for a long hike with Sonya, my best friend.

WORDY  Afterward, we drank some apple juice, which is a good thirst quencher.

REVISED Afterward, we drank some apple juice, a good thirst quencher.

3. Take out a whole group of unnecessary words.

WORDY I spent a lot of time writing this report because I really want people to learn about manatees so they can know all about them.

REVISED I spent a lot of time writing this report because I want people to learn about manatees.

Exercise 10  Revising Wordy Sentences

Some of the following sentences are wordy and need improvement. Decide which of the sentences are wordy; then, revise them. You can (1) replace a phrase with one word, (2) take out who is or which is, or (3) take out a whole group of unnecessary words. If a sentence is effective as it is, write C for correct.

1. Our science class has been learning about the starfish, which is a strange and beautiful animal.
2. What I want to say is that starfish are fascinating creatures.
3. A starfish has little feet tipped with suction cups that have suction power.
4. At the end of each arm is a sensitive eyespot.
5. In spite of the fact that the eyespot cannot really see things, it can tell light from dark.
6. The starfish’s mouth is in the middle of its body.
7. When it uses its arms, it can pull at the shells of clams.
8. At the point at which the clam’s shell opens, the starfish can feed on the clam.
9. Starfish come in a variety of colors, shapes, and sizes, and some are bigger than others.
10. This photograph shows a blue sea star holding onto a soft coral by holding it with its suction cups.
Varying Sentence Structure

An important way to keep your readers’ attention is to mix sentences of different lengths and structures. Think like a movie director. If you were making a movie, you would include long, complex scenes; but you would mix those scenes with shorter, simpler scenes to keep your audience’s attention. A movie made up entirely of long scenes or short scenes would be difficult for your audience to follow. Apply the same ideas to your writing.

For example, the writer of the following paragraph uses only short sentences.

Jim Knaub lost the use of his legs in a motorcycle accident. He decided he would not let that slow him down. He started racing wheelchairs. All the other racers were using standard wheelchairs. Those wheelchairs were not fast enough for Jim. He began to design his own. Soon, his lightweight, ultrafast wheelchair was winning races. He became a well-known wheelchair-racing champion. Jim now designs wheelchairs for others to use.

Now read the revised paragraph. Notice how the writer has varied the sentence structure to include different sentence lengths and a mixture of simple, compound, and complex sentences.

When Jim Knaub lost the use of his legs in a motorcycle accident, he decided he would not let that slow him down. He started racing wheelchairs. All the other racers were using standard wheelchairs, but those wheelchairs were not fast enough for Jim. He began to design his own. Soon, his lightweight, ultrafast wheelchair was winning races. He became a well-known wheelchair-racing champion and began to design wheelchairs for others to use.
Varying sentence length keeps the reader interested in the story. By changing the sentence structure, the writer avoids starting each sentence the same way, which would make the paragraph boring and repetitive.

**Exercise 11 Adding Variety to Sentences**

The following paragraph is uninteresting because it includes only compound sentences. Rewrite the paragraph to include a variety of sentence structures. Mix short, simple sentences; compound sentences; and longer sentences with subordinate clauses in your version. Remember, you are the director of this piece of writing. Use variety to keep your audience involved.

My friends and I have been talking, and we have made a decision. We should have a day off, and we could go on a class picnic. We could do it right before winter break, or we could go near the end of the school year. We could each bring a sack lunch, or we could each bring something to share with the rest of the class. The park near the school has picnic tables, and it has playing fields and a pool. We don’t all know how to swim, so the students who can’t swim can play soccer or baseball instead. It might seem bad to take a free day, but we work hard the rest of the year. We would enjoy the picnic, and we would have a fun day. We would return to school, and we would have smiles on our faces.

**Review C Revising a Paragraph by Improving Sentence Style**

The paragraph on the following page is hard to read because it contains stringy and wordy sentences. Identify the stringy and wordy sentences, and use the methods you have learned to revise them. Try to mix simple, compound, and complex sentences in your improved version.
The movie *Anastasia* is based on a real story about a real girl from history. Her name was Anastasia Romanov and she was born in 1901 and lived in Russia. The movie is about some historical events in Russia’s history, and many things in the movie are not true. For example, the movie says that Anastasia was eight years old when the revolutionaries came to overthrow and defeat her father, who was the czar, but the real Anastasia was a teenager in real life. The movie shows Anastasia and her grandmother, who was the Grand Duchess Marie, escaping together, but in reality her grandmother was already safely in Denmark when the family was seized and captured. Unlike the character in the movie, the real Anastasia did not get away, her remains were found with her family’s remains when they were found in 1991. Although *Anastasia* is an interesting movie, people who see it should also know the real story that happened.