

Grades 11–12 Playlist: Vary Syntax for Effect

Aligns with *CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.3.A*:

- Vary syntax for effect, consulting references (e.g., Tufte’s *Artful Sentences*) for guidance as needed; apply an understanding of syntax to the study of complex texts when reading.

Welcome

There are many ways to structure a sentence, but not all of them will be equally effective. **Syntax** is the arrangement of words and phrases to make meaningful, well-formed sentences. By paying attention to where and how information is placed into sentences, readers will be able to interpret syntax and gain a better understanding of what the text is saying.

Objectives

In this playlist, students will learn how to:

- identify techniques for varying the syntax in sentences.
- analyze the effects of varied syntax in complex texts.
- write sentences with varied syntax for effect.

Review

Key Terms

- A **simple sentence** has a single, independent clause.
 - An **independent clause** contains a predicate and a subject.
 - The **predicate** contains the verb.
- A **complex sentence** has an independent and dependent clause.
 - A **dependent clause** cannot stand on its own because it does not convey a complete thought, even though it has a subject and a verb.
- A **compound sentence** has two independent clauses. These clauses are connected by a coordinating conjunction.
 - **Coordinating conjunctions** are words such as *or* and *and* that connect words, phrases, or sentences that are of equal rank or value.
- An **interrupting phrase** or **interrupter** is a phrase that disrupts the flow of a sentence.
- **Declarative sentences** are statements. They convey factual information.



Exploring the Standard

Writers vary their syntax to prevent their writing from sounding stilted or boring. If a paragraph contained nothing but short sentences with the same structure, it would not be very interesting for the reader. Instead, writers should strive to use a mix of short and long sentences and to experiment with different sentence structures. Varying syntax adds interest and rhythm to writing.

Watch!

Watch this video to learn more about the effect of repetitive syntax and how varied syntax can create more engaging writing:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKLpw0-OYuw>

A Closer Look: Techniques for Varying Syntax

Relying on only one kind of sentence pattern will result in writing that sounds flat or monotone. Variety makes for stronger and more interesting writing. There are many ways to incorporate varied syntax into a piece of writing. Here are a few options:

- Use different types of sentences.
- In a paragraph, use several types of sentences instead of just one or two.
- Use different punctuation to emphasize mood.

Now take a look at some specific examples of how to vary sentences. Pay particular attention to the explanation and come up with another example.

1. Instead of presenting information in two simple sentences, a writer could combine the information into a compound or complex sentence.
 - Trent pulled out his lunchbox. He took a big bite of his sandwich.
 - Trent pulled out his lunchbox and took a big bite of his sandwich.

The second example is more concise but still includes all the information from the first example. Here are some other tried and true methods for adding variety and interest to sentences:

2. Begin a sentence with an introductory phrase or clause:
 - While jogging in the park, she saw a flock of geese.

The opening phrase “while jogging in the park” adds specificity. It explains where the subject was and what she was doing when the main action of the sentence occurred.



Teaching Notes: Vary Syntax for Effect

The goal of L.11-12.3.A is for students to understand and use varying syntax for effect, apply their knowledge when reading complete texts, and know what resources to consult for reference. The following information contains ideas that teachers can incorporate into their classroom as well as additional resources to peruse and integrate into instruction as appropriate.

Activities

1. Ask students to bring in a piece of writing that they like to read in their spare time. It could be a story like a comic book or novel, or it could be an informational text like a printed web page or magazine. Have students analyze the syntax in a few paragraphs of the text they chose. How many techniques for varying syntax can they identify?
2. Direct students to conduct research, finding three texts that use different kinds of syntax. For example, Ernest Hemingway uses lots of short, terse sentences in his writing, while F. Scott Fitzgerald favors longer, more lavish sentences. As a result of differences like these, different authors can have wildly different writing styles. Ask students to think about how the authors' use of syntax helps establish such contrasts in their writing styles.

Writing Prompts

1. Assign students a grade-appropriate excerpt from a fictional text and ask them to identify uses of varied syntax. Direct students to write a brief paragraph for each example they find, explaining which technique the author uses and how. Encourage students to find three or more examples of varied syntax techniques.
2. Review with students some of the effects that can be achieved by varying syntax. Direct students to write a short story using syntax techniques both to create emphasis and to show relationships between two or more ideas. Ask students to explain which techniques they used and how they achieved each purpose in their story.

Additional Resources

Consider these additional resources when teaching L.11-12.3.A:

“Smart Words: Transition Words and Phrases”:

This resource provides a detailed list of transition words and phrases that can be used to vary syntax and create cohesion between ideas in text.

- <http://www.smart-words.org/linking-words/transition-words.html>

