

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.



3. Use interrupting phrases set off by commas:

- Mark received his test back from the teacher and, to his delight, got a perfect score.

The interrupting phrase “to his delight” adds meaning to the first clause. It explains how Mark felt when he got his test back.

4. Use dashes to set off abrupt breaks in thought:

- The campers went hiking last night – the last thing they should have been doing – and ended up lost in the woods.

Dashes are not frequently used, so their occasional appearance adds texture to writing.

5. Use a question, a command, or an exclamation to add variety to a string of declarative sentences:

- We came in first place at the talent show. We were pretty surprised.
- We came in first place at the talent show. What are the odds of that happening?
- We came in first place at the talent show. Pinch me if I’m dreaming.
- We came in first place at the talent show. We were shocked!

Practice!

Practice varying syntax by moving a phrase or clause to the beginning of a sentence:

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/quizzes/nova/nova9.htm>

Combine these techniques in different ways to add sentence variety and make paragraphs livelier for the reader.

A Closer Look: Varying Syntax for Effect

Varied syntax can also be used to create a specific effect in a piece of writing. It can make connections between multiple statements or add emphasis to a certain idea.

Imagine if a writer used mostly longer sentences and then broke the pattern with a short sentence. What would be the effect? The change in length would draw attention to the idea in the short sentence and make it seem more important.



Alternating between short and long sentences is a very effective way to add emphasis to an idea. Look at the example below:

¹ American soldiers were at Valley Forge in 1777. They were in dire straits. They were tired and weak. They had recently battled the British. Morale was low. Food supplies were dwindling. Help eventually arrived. A baker named Christopher Ludwig was sent by Congress. He became the superintendent of bakers. He was also director of baking in the United States Army. He served 135 pounds of bread for every 100 pounds of flour he was given. The Baker General helped the troops survive the winter. He got the U.S. Army on its feet again in no time.

In the example, most of sentences are very short, which makes the writing feel blunt and simplistic. In addition, most sentences begin with words like “they,” “he,” and “the.” This makes the writing feel repetitive.

Now look at the revised text below:

¹ In the winter of 1777, American soldiers made camp at Valley Forge. Tired and weak from recent battles with the British, the soldiers were in dire straits. Morale was low, and food supplies were dwindling. Help finally arrived in the form of a patriotic baker named Christopher Ludwig. Congress called on Ludwig to serve as superintendent of bakers and director of baking in the United States Army. Serving up 135 pounds of bread for every 100 pounds of flour he was given, the Baker General helped the troops survive the winter and got the U.S. Army on its feet again in no time.

Notice the revision avoids using the same word to begin multiple sentences. The different beginnings not only add variety to the text, they change the emphasis of the sentences as well. For example, the second sentence begins with the phrase “Tired and weak from recent battles with the British.” This emphasizes how the soldiers felt and why. It introduces the difficult circumstances the soldiers faced previously and then goes on to describe their current state at Valley Forge.

In the revision, long sentences are used to incorporate a lot of the information from the shorter sentences of the original text. This helps indicate connections between points that might have seemed less related in the original.

The revision also uses its own short sentences to emphasize critical points that might cause an emotional response in a reader. “Morale was low, and food supplies were dwindling.” This short sentence draws the reader’s attention to the hardships the soldiers faced at Valley Forge. Because the sentences that precede it are much longer, the shorter sentence has a greater impact on the reader.



Watch!

Watch this video to learn more about manipulating sentence parts to vary syntax and achieve different effects:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkKcPakwnuk>

A Closer Look: Consulting References

Sometimes, a reader or a writer needs a little help in understanding best practices for varying syntax for effect. Fortunately, there are a lot of wonderful resources that a person can consult. Here are a few examples:

- Most school websites have a page for grammar.
- *Fowler's Modern English Usage*
- *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*

These are available as guides that explain the rules and provide examples. Turn to these resources if unsure about something specific, such as how to vary compound and complex sentences to emphasize emotion, for example.

Applying the Standard

Write a paragraph using varied syntax. Include short, simple sentences and long, complex sentences.

Present the paragraph to another person and ask him or her the following questions. What does each long sentence emphasize? Which connections do the long sentences show that may be missing from the short sentences? When would short sentences be most appropriate or effective? How about long sentences?

Practice!

Complete this activity for additional practice in varying syntax for effect:

<https://www.opened.com/assessment/apply-knowledge-of-language-in-different-contexts/1074085>



Self-Check: L.11–12.3.A

1. Which of the sentences in the table use syntax to emphasize details about the weather? Give your answer by writing Yes or No for each sentence.

Sentence	Yes/ No
On the chilly morning, Victoria stood shivering at the bus stop waiting for the bus to arrive.	
Veronica stood at the bus stop waiting for the bus to arrive, and it was chilly so she shivered.	
While Veronica stood at the bus stop waiting for the bus to arrive, she noticed that it was chilly.	
Shivering in the chilly morning air, Veronica waited at the bus stop for the bus to arrive.	
The bus stop was where Veronica waited on the chilly morning for the bus to arrive, and she was shivering while she waited.	

2. Edward is writing a narrative. He wants to make his narrative as gripping as possible. He consults Virginia Tufte's book, *Artful Sentences*, and reads that authors use some sentences to create a sense of drama. He writes the following paragraph.

"Maeve assumed that when she stepped off the ship in America, life would be immediately different. This is not how it happened. Her first days in her new life were strikingly similar to her life back in Ireland. She spent her days cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children."

Which sentence from Edward's narrative is the **most** dramatic? Select the correct option.

- A. "Maeve assumed that when she stepped off the ship in America, life would be immediately different."
B. "This is not how it happened."
C. "Her first days in her new life were strikingly similar to her life back in Ireland."
D. "She spent her days cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children."
3. Which **two** revisions of sentence 3 in the following paragraph **best** vary the syntax and **best** draw attention to the ideas in the sentence?

(1) When Carlotta was out walking, she noticed footprints in the mud on the trail leading to the river. (2) She knew they were from some animal, but her lack of knowledge of rural life proved to be a disadvantage in this situation, since she had no more idea of the type of animal than she had of the type of crops planted in the fields. (3) Carlotta bent down to view the prints, looking at the shape and size, even running her fingers over the dried mud. (4) While she did so, she thought about all of the animals that she heard her cousins mention as living in the forest: deer, moose, bear, and bobcats among others.



Select all the correct options from the following.

- A. Carlotta examined the prints carefully.
- B. Carlotta crouched down in order to inspect the prints so she could see the shape and size and even touch the prints.
- C. Carlotta used her senses of sight and touch to analyze the prints more carefully.
- D. Carlotta bent her knees and squatted down so she could get closer to the prints and see and feel them.
- E. Carlotta took a close look at the prints.

