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## Teacher Guide 129

# Use a range of sentence structures for different effects

You will learn how to

- use sentences of different lengths and types for different effects
- vary your use of the first and third person, and introduce ellipses to engage the reader's response.

Selecting appropriate types of sentences – and knowing where to position them – can help to speed up a narrative, introduce something surprising or develop an idea.

## Getting you thinking

Read these two very similar extracts from a story.

I didn't see them at first in the darkness, which was descending as I set off at a brisk pace from the station towards the lights of the city. Then I noticed that they were following me so I began to increase my pace almost without thinking. Behind me I could hear their steps speed up too, so I increased mine again, beginning to panic, and then began to be aware of something else – that I had been wrong about the road, too, as it led nowhere, and there was just a dead end with no escape.

I didn't see them at first. The darkness was descending as I set off at a brisk pace from the station towards the lights of the city. Then I noticed that they were following me. I began to increase my pace, almost without thinking. Behind me, I could hear their steps speed up, too, so I increased mine, beginning to panic, and then began to be aware of something else. I had been wrong about the road as it led nowhere. There was just a dead end. No escape.

- 1 What differences are there in the use of sentence types and structure?
- 2 Which has more tension and drama?

## Exploring the skills

In stories and description, short or **minor sentences** can

- state a simple fact or event clearly – perhaps to surprise or to clarify what is happening
- indicate a sudden pause in proceedings or a change of direction (literally or emotionally)
- sum up or add a punchline – either serious or comical.



### Glossary

**minor sentences:** sentences that do not contain a subject and/or a verb, but that still make sense (for example, 'No escape.')

Longer sentences can

- explore reasons or consequences
- provide descriptive or factual detail to fill in what is happening
- create momentum with a series of linked events or actions building up towards a moment of drama or release of emotion.

**3** Rewrite this next paragraph from the same story. Create a mix of longer and shorter/minor sentences for dramatic effect. You will need to remove some words, and perhaps add one or two.

I was trapped and turned around to see them circling me as their hoods cast shadows across their faces in the cold winter light. One of them stepped forward and I instinctively took a pace backwards until my back was pressed against the wall. To my right I saw that the door of a nearby house was slightly ajar so I ran towards it. As I reached it, it slammed shut in my face so I had no option but to face my pursuers again.



You could start: 'I was trapped. I turned around to...'

### Developing the skills

The grammatical structure of your sentences is as important as the length in terms of adding information and creating atmosphere. **Non-finite clauses** are a good way of economically adding detail to sentences. For example, you could write:

*I turned round to face them. I realised I was trapped.*

But if you wanted to avoid the repetitious use of the subject 'I', you could write:

*Turning round to face them, I realised I was trapped.*

**Glossary**

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**non-finite clause:**  
 a subordinate clause that does not contain a finite verb (a verb in the present or past tense), but one in its non-finite form, such as an infinitive ('to go') or a participle ('going'); in non-finite clauses, there is no subject, or else the subject is implied

- non-finite clause that has no subject
- comma separates non-finite clause from main clause
- main clause containing subject 'I' and verb 'was trapped'

## Chapter 6 . Topic 3

Non-finite clauses, like subordinate clauses with finite verbs, can have different functions.

Non-finite clause	Example	How it works
Adverbial (to tell us more about the action)	'Putting on his dark glasses, the gang leader stepped towards him.'	The phrase 'Putting on his dark glasses' adds detail to the verb 'stepped' and what the gang leader <i>does</i> .
Adjectival (to tell us more about the noun)	'The railway underpass, covered in graffiti, felt unsafe to me.'	The phrase 'covered in graffiti' tells us more about the noun 'railway underpass' and <i>what it looked like</i> .
To act like nouns (to describe an event or an ongoing state)	'Waiting at the bus stop was boring, but she had no choice.'	This is a compound sentence with two main clauses. The <i>act/event of waiting</i> is the subject of the first clause and acts as a noun.

We can also use prepositional phrases to add more detail:

**Under the pale lamplight**, the girl waited for the bus.

Here, 'Under the pale lamplight' tells us *where* she waited.

We can modify or build further detail into these clauses by adding adverbs:

**Slowly** putting on his dark glasses, the gang leader stepped towards me.

Not only are we told what the leader does as he steps forward (puts on glasses), we are also told *how* he does it.

- 4** Copy and complete these sentences by adding either adverbs, non-finite clauses or prepositional phrases.
- \_\_\_\_\_, the gate opened only when I gave it a hard shove.
  - \_\_\_\_\_walking up the gravel path, I half expected to see my father come to meet me.
  - \_\_\_\_\_, he had been dead many years, so there was no chance of that, except in ghost form.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ the decaying roof, I could see ravens staring down at me. This was home, but not as I wanted it to be.

- 5** Annotate your text with the types of clause you have used.



You can convey voice or persona in a range of different ways, too.

**A** The fact is, I killed him. It was wrong, and there are no excuses; it was simple, pure jealousy.

Here, the blunt sentences suggest a logical person who is trying to explain something horrific. But the same content could be presented in quite a different voice.

**B** Mad? Would you call me mad...? I'm as sane as you are! But then the whole world is mad, isn't it? You don't... you can't understand why I acted as I did. You haven't felt jealousy like mine, have you? Have you?

- 6** Write brief answers to these questions.
- What effect has the writer created with the style of sentences and punctuation in extract B?
  - What effect does the use of 'you' have on the style in B?
  - How is the voice of B different from that of A?

Another way to add interest to your writing is to punctuate your text with **ellipses** to suggest hesitation and create suspense.

After what seemed an eternity I heard a sound. The door opened...but no one came in.

'Who's there?' I cried, taking a step forward. 'I have a gun... and I'll...I'll use it!'

- 7** Complete these three extracts by adding some final words and using ellipses to create a dramatic pause or suggest hesitation.
- I opened the tiny box and gasped, 'It's \_\_\_\_\_
  - He wasn't sure what to do as she hadn't come. Perhaps \_\_\_\_\_
  - Who was the child in the faded photo? I suppose I'll \_\_\_\_\_

### Applying the skills

- 8** Write the first three paragraphs of a story that begins with the main character being declared insane as a result of his or her actions. Write in the first person and set the story in any time – modern or historical.

### Checklist for success

- ✓ Vary the length of your sentences for drama and pace and to reveal or withhold information.
- ✓ Use a wide range of sentence openings to clearly portray the place, atmosphere, characters and their behaviour.

### Glossary

**ellipses:** (plural of ellipsis), a series of three dots in sentences or at the end of them to suggest hesitation or silence

### Top tip

Don't overuse ellipses in your writing. It is important to vary your text, but punctuation such as ellipses (and exclamation marks) can lose their effect quickly and become irritating.



### Check your progress:

#### Sound progress >>>

I can use a range of sentence types and lengths when writing in the third person.

#### Excellent progress >>>>

I can vary my sentence lengths and types to reflect the character of my narrator and to build drama.