

# SENTENCE STRUCTURE: COMBINING AND SUBORDINATING

In *Writing Well*, Donald Hall and Sven Birkerts write that while a “simple sentence is direct and clear...the simple sentence will not always embody a complete thought” (137). If you find yourself writing series after series of short (choppy) sentences, you might want to complicate your sentence structure habits with **coordination (combining)** and **subordination**.

## **Problems with short sentences:**

- Short, choppy sentences demand attention from the reader; they should be used primarily for emphasis.
- Short sentences cannot show relationships that exist between ideas of different importance.
- Short sentences draw attention away from the ideas in the paper.

## COORDINATION: COMBINING THOUGHTS IN ONE SENTENCE

1. Combine two complete thoughts with a comma and a **conjunction** (*and, but, for, nor, or, yet, so*). Remember that each of these conjunctions has slightly different weight.

**I went to the airport to pick up my brother. His plane was late.**

→ **I went to the airport to pick up my brother, but his plane was late.**

2. Combine two complete thoughts with a **semicolon**. Hall and Birkerts write that “the semicolon implies a close relationship between the two clauses [as does *and*]” but provides a pause and, thus, a slightly different rhythm (141).

**I left for the airport too early. I always think traffic will be worse than it is.**

→ **I left for the airport too early; I always think traffic will be worse than it is.**

3. Introduce information with a **colon**.

**I headed toward the terminal. I stuffed my parking voucher, my keys, and his flight information in my pocket.**

→ **I headed toward the terminal and stuffed the essentials in my pocket: parking voucher, keys, and flight information.**

4. Combine two complete thoughts with a semicolon and a **connective adverb** (*however, therefore, consequently, thus, and more*).

**I rushed toward baggage claim. I slowed down when I saw the “Delayed” sign.**

→ **I rushed toward baggage claim; however, I slowed down when I saw the “Delayed” sign.**

## SUBORDINATION: SETTING UP RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THOUGHTS

A **subordinate** or **dependent clause** is a part of a sentence that adds meaning to the rest of the sentence (the **independent clause**) but cannot stand alone as a sentence. You can join these dependent ideas to an independent sentence by using certain **subordinating conjunctions** (*while, since, because, if, although, unless, after, until, before*, and others) or **relative pronouns** (*that, which, who, whom, where*). Subordinate clauses show the relationship between two or more ideas by setting the scene, offering an explanation, or telling us *who* or *which one*, among other functions.

1. Combine two ideas with an introductory dependent clause.

**I did well on my exam. I can relax about my grade for now.**

→ **Since I did well on my exam, I can relax about my grade for now.**

2. Combine two ideas with a concluding dependent clause.

**I did well on my exam. I can relax about my grade for now.**

→ **I can relax about my grade for now since I did well on my exam.**

**NOTE THAT INTRODUCTORY DEPENDENT CLAUSES REQUIRE COMMAS AFTER THEM, WHILE DEPENDENT CLAUSES AT THE END OF A SENTENCE HAVE NO COMMA BEFORE THEM.**

3. Combine two ideas by using a **relative clause** (usually describes *who* or *which one*).

**Jake is the oldest student in the class. He is always more prepared than I am.**

→ **Jake, who is the oldest student in the class, is always more prepared than I am.**

**Renee has been spreading around that rumor. Everyone's heard it.**

→ **Everyone's heard the rumor that Renee's been spreading around.**

4. Often, you can shorten the dependent idea to make it more of a descriptive phrase than a complete thought.

**Jake, who is the oldest student in the class, is always more prepared than I am.**

→ **Jake, the oldest student in the class, is always more prepared than I am.**

**The oldest student in the class, Jake is always more prepared than I am.**

**Since I was running late, I didn't bother to answer the phone when it rang.**

→ **Running late, I didn't bother to answer the phone when it rang.**

**The key to drawing in your readers is to vary your sentence structure. Many consecutive coordinated sentences or a series of sentences that all begin with a subordinate clause are just as distracting and boring as repeated simple sentences.**

