

For the same reasons the parallel sentence puts off the modern novelist—its grace and order—it's a smart play in policy and professional writing. (I should note, in passing, that if the sentence I concocted in 'Life sentences' (p 71) as an illustration of the sins of abstraction had one virtue it was the parallelism of its structure. Read it over, and you may pick it up. But, of course, in that case the parallelism only underlies the pomposity.) Parallelism makes bullet-point lists work, too, as long as each item is structured identically.

Shorrick & Associates must do four things this year:

- grow its professional staff numbers to twelve
 - improve its people's writing skills
 - place more research publications in the relevant journals
 - raise its corporate profile in the government sector.
- Three factors have led to our poor profit result this financial year:
- the upward pressure the drought placed on grain prices
 - the decline in sales because of the extortion campaign against Weccies mid-year
 - the entry into the market of Uncle Tom's Organic Weet Flakes.

6 Balanced

A looser kind of parallelism, more common in contemporary writing, is the balanced sentence—a sentence made of two parts, each about the same length and weight and divided by a pause (a comma or a semicolon—or a dash). Here are three such sentences in a row in a John Updike paragraph:

Inhabiting a male body is much like having a bank account; as long as it's healthy, you don't think much about it. Compared to the female body, it is a low-maintenance proposition: a shower now and then, trim the fingernails every ten days, a haircut once a month. Oh yes, shaving or buzzing away at your face every morning.

—John Updike, 'The Disposable Rocket', *More Matter*

Fredrick, M. The Little Red Writing Book (2006) UNSW PRESS

One might also balance one whole sentence against another, shaping them much the same. This works best when the two sentences point up a contrast:

Full, the reservoir looks all right: a mirror Sheep Creek dies in, timber straight and still along the edge, and sky swimming through its face. Drained of water, the reservoir that used to be a hayfield is a barren gravel pit with the dead creek laid out in the bottom of it.

—James Galvin, *The Meadow*

A good writer is trying to do more than just make sense. Balance, like all these devices, rewards readers by giving them a pattern and a large-scale rhythm. Those things are engaging in themselves, but they also underscore one's message, giving it a form a reader can carry away and hang onto:

TRY THIS

Make an argument about something that concerns you right now. Write a paragraph, and use some balanced sentences in it.

B—SUBORDINATING SENTENCES

But there's a limit to what one can do with simple sentences, and we've reached it. The complex sentence brings an extra dimension to composition, a whole new bag of tricks. For it lets a writer stress one part of a sentence over another.

Subordination brings nuance to writing. It allows modulation

The passage was cool; a telephone sat on the lino.

—Helen Garner, *The Children's Bach*

This immense process had begun in the United Kingdom and western Europe by 1815; it was soon to spread, with increasing impetus, eastward to Germany, Italy, and eventually Russia.

—David Thomson, *Europe Since Napoleon*

pose a problem and suggest an answer; they make an exception and state the rule; or they excuse themselves for what they are about to say—and then say it. They are a plain or a series of foothills and then the main range. They feel artificial—a little more like oratory, a little less like speech. They have an elegance about them, when they are well handled; and they are probably more commonly encountered than loose subordinating sentences. They ask a reader to wait, though. Watch that you don't try your reader's patience too often or too long.

Here are some examples:

Early in October 1975, when the first rains had already come but were still deciding what sort of season to create ... a small plague of two missionaries descended upon us.

—Alexandra Fuller, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*

On the bay shores and down the coastal rivers, a far gray sun picks up dead joints from windrows of rotted mullet ...

—Peter Matthiessen, *Killing Mister Watson*

If much later the Germans again fell behind their western neighbors, if in the seventeenth, eighteenth and even in the nineteenth century they were still in a sense imitating the more advanced West, the explanation is not to be sought in their barbaric origins.

—Golo Mann, *The History of Germany Since 1789*

If you can think of life, for a moment, as a large house with a nursery, living and dining rooms, bedrooms, study, and so forth, all unfamiliar and bright, the chapters which follow are, in a way, like looking through the windows of this house.

—James Salter, *Burning the Days*

TRY THIS

Take this passage from Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, written in his most limpid segregating style, and rework it using only loose and periodic sentences. With apologies to Mr. H.

and subtlety of connection, especially useful in dealing with psychology and character in story and with exposition and argument in other narratives. It brings to the sentence the gearshift, the key change, the piano and the forte.

There are, believe it or not, four species of subordinating sentence, each an instance of the complex sentence. Then, beyond those, is the compound-complex sentence and all the incredible variety it introduces.

7 Loose sentences

Here you start with your main point, and then add something more about it, often an explanation or justification, in a subordinate clause. The more subordinate phrases you add, the more the style approaches the cumulative sentence we looked at above (the difference coming down to the often irrelevant question of whether the bits that accumulate are phrases or, as here, clauses). Like the cumulative sentence, the loose sentence feels relaxed (hence its name). It feels like talking. In brief, it's good for explanation. At length, it suits description.

I am standing for this high office because I feel I have no other choice. I first stumbled on this idea during the first journey I made to the outback.

These changes strike us as essential if the agency hopes to bring its financial accounting in line with best practice.

Here was a place that I could come to now and then for the rest of my life, that would no more stay the same than I would, and that would express its love by having me stay and ignoring me exclusively. I haven't seen a soul since I got back from overseas.

8 Periodic

Periodic sentences end with their main clause. Here's a different music. Such sentences set a stage and put someone down on it; they

In the morning I walked down the Boulevard to the Rue Soufflot for coffee and brioches. It was a fine morning. The horse-chestnut trees in the Luxembourg Gardens were in bloom. There was the pleasant early-morning feeling of a hot day. I read the papers with the coffee and then smoked a cigarette. The flower women were coming up from the market and arranging their daily stock. Students went by going up to the law school, or down to the Sorbonne. The Boulevard was busy with trams and people going to work. I got on an S bus and rode down to the Madeleine standing on the back platform. From the Madeleine I walked along the Boulevard des Capucines to the Opéra, and up to my office.

9 Centred sentences

You start with a subordinate clause; you put your main clause down; you end with another subordinate clause (or two)—this is the centred sentence. Some books assure me this is common and handy. I've never thought it either, myself. I don't think I use it much, and I find it hard to turn up many examples. But here's one I unearth, at last, in Montaigne:

If one book wears me, I take up another, applying myself to it only during those hours when I begin to be gripped by boredom.

—Michel de Montaigne, 'On Books', *The Complete Essays*

It's a sophisticated way, I guess, to order a sentence with three (or more) related things on its mind.

10 Convoluted sentences

The convoluted sentence, if you use it deftly and only now and then, makes an elegant change-up. I guess it's a kind of wrong 'un, for the cricketers among you, or a curve-ball for the baseballers. You take a main clause ('the convoluted sentence makes an elegant change-up'), and you split it, often between its subject and its verb, and there you put a subordinate thought ('if you use it deftly and only now and then'). It's like an afterthought that occurs to you mid-sentence, or, more aptly, an interpolation, an aside. And then you

pick up your clause where you left it and round it off.

The clause you insert is sometimes called a parenthetic expression because you notionally ask a reader to take it out of the sentence if they wish. Generally the best way to punctuate around the parenthetic remark is with commas—or with dashes, if you want to emphasise the thing a little more. Not, despite the name of the thing, with parentheses.

This structure holds a reader in suspense while you sidetrack from the sentence for a bit. Watch that the interpolated clause doesn't go on too long—or you'll lose them. And don't do it too often—or it will sound like you're absent-minded.

Good, if that's what you want to call this force that drives enterprisers, is good.

The first thought he had upon waking—if he had any thought at all—was how nice it would be to go back to sleep.

The political revolution of November 1918, which accompanied the armistice and the abdication of the Emperor, was made by none and wanted by none.

—David Thomson, *Europe Since Napoleon*

The geese, which had wintered by the lake, took flight at the first hint of spring.

11 Compound-complex sentences

Combine a compound and a complex sentence, and this is what you get. In other words, you've made a compound-complex sentence when you combine (at least) two independent clauses with (at least) one dependent clause. These are subtle and sophisticated. And they can be tricky to get just right. They make you think hard about your commas. But they offer up the same kind of pleasure as a walk through woods over undulant ground.

He felt no just, and when she moaned and tightened, he felt no sense of triumph.

—Graham Greene, *The Honorary Consul*

I knew I was quite drunk, and when I came in I put on the light over

the head of the bed and started to read.

—Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*

I was born free, and that I might continue so, I retir'd to these solitary
Hills and Plains, where Trees are my Companions, and clear

Fountains my Looking-glasses.

—Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

Here is a beautifully balanced example from Cormac McCarthy's

The Crossing. Because McCarthy eschews commas, it's not till you

look closely at his conjunction-rich sentences that you see

how many dependent clauses he uses. (I've highlighted the

dependent clauses. Apart from those, there are two independent

clauses, each with a compound verb.) Hear its irregular but orderly

rhythm.

They crossed through the dried leaves in the river bed and rode till

they came to a tank or pothole in the river and he dismounted and

watered the horse while Boyd walked the shore looking for muskrat sign.

—Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing*

Here's one from Tim Winton (who doesn't go for conventional

commas either), doing its musical work:

On the long grassy bank beneath the peppermint trees and the

cavernous roots of the Moreton Bay figs, they lay blankets and white

tablecloths which break up in the filtered sunlight and they sprawl in

their workclothes and stockings, rollers in, buns half out.

—Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet*

And just to show that they don't have to be long, here are two more

from *Cloudstreet*:

His hand was between her breasts and she left it there as the river

went by and by.

When he turned into Cloudstreet the sun was on the rooftops and a

man stood alone across the road from the big house.

And an essayist's compound-complex from George Orwell:

[A writer's] subject-matter will be determined by the age he

lives in—at least this is true in tumultuous, revolutionary times

like our own—but before he ever begins to write he will have

acquired an emotional attitude from which he will never

completely escape.

—George Orwell, 'Why I Write', *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell*

TRY THIS

1 Write a couple of compound-complex sentences describing

the best holiday you ever took.

2 Write another couple about the route you take to work.

3 Write another about your favourite river.

That's it for, as it were, legitimate sentences. But there is still one
kind to go: that uncultivated child, the fragment.

12 Fragment sentences

If you put a full stop at the end of anything less than an independent

clause (unless it's a question, in which case you put a question

mark), you've written yourself a fragment. In other words, you

cannot make a *grammatical* sentence with a word or a phrase or a

dependent clause (nor can you join two independent clauses with a

comma and make a sentence). Microsoft Word will tell you you've

written a fragment; and you have. And in certain settings—the legal

brief, the board paper, the headmaster's letter, the audit report, the

academic paper, the insurance contract—you'd better follow Words

lead. To be honest, most of us write them by mistake. Whenever

that's the case, or whenever the formality of the occasion demands

it, write your sentences out in full.

James Agee writes a sentence, here, that is a string of fragments. People go by; things go by, goes the sentence before, setting it up. The fragmentation of the list implies disconnection and contemporaneity; it is a shifting mosaic—a kaleidoscope:

A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt; a loud auto; a quiet auto; people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling, switching their weight of aestival body, talking casually, the taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard and starched milk, the image upon them of lovers and horsemen, squared with clowns in hueless amber.

—James Agee, 'Knoxville: Summer of 1915', *The Best American Essays of the Century*

Della Falconer writes almost as many fragments as complete sentences in her spare poem of a novel *The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers*. Her fragments capture the voice, as it were, of a mind at its asymptactical work of memory. Her fragments are shards of an old man's recollection, stabs of indecision, intrusions of landscape. It seems right that they are incomplete, their subjects or their verbs lost:

The others dead:

Summer who said once that no one in all his life ever posted him a letter.

Madden who ate grass when he was nervous.

A dash into the big nothing, the mystery of air behind them.

Custer's legend still growing even now ...

A crawfish he had seen once in a market in New Orleans ...

History another battle.

How to explain it to the boy.

Outside, the bright sheen of the river passing and repassing.

—Della Falconer, *The Lost Thoughts of Soldiers*

Strictly speaking failed sentences, fragments belong in the best writing. They only work, though, when you use them now and then. They work by shocking us slightly. They are emphatic. Bold. If you use them too often they just become dull; they may imply that you can't be bothered, or don't know how, to write a sentence that goes the distance. They have become a bit of a fetish in contemporary fiction. They work best, like alcohol, I'm told, in moderation.

These are the varieties of the fragment. The subject alone. The sentence without a verb. The verb without a subject—goes on and on. The verb in a participial or infinitive form—going on and on. The lone noun. The lone adjective. Alone. Not lost. Just alone. And emphatic.

In the paper today, Peter Roebuck uses one to rest his case:

Australia will survive this turbulence and might learn from it ... Ponting could take the following side onto the field: Jacques, Gilchrist, Ponting, Martyn (or Cosgrove), Symonds, Clarke, Hussey, Hogg (or Warne), Watson, Lee, McGrath, Bracken (or Stuart Clark). Not much of a crisis.

In this passage, Cormac McCarthy uses a number of different fragments at the end of a passage that begins with other sentence types to capture the short-breathed excitement of the boy. The fragments release that held breath, and they choreograph the gestures of the wolves:

He was very cold. He waited. It was very still. He could see by his breath how the wind lay and he watched his breath appear and vanish and appear and vanish constantly before him in the cold and he waited a long time. Then he saw them coming. Loping and twisting. Dancing. Tunneling their noses in the snow. Loping and running by twos in a standing dance and running on again.

—Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing*

*All good things come by grace and grace
comes by art and art does not come easy.*

—Norman Maclean

Time piece

Old watches are my weakness. Old watches and old fountain pens. Okay, old watches, old pens, books of any age and cowboy boots. But that's it. And most of all it's watches.

You can understand the pen thing: I'm a writer. But watches? Time—what it is, how it felt to other people, why it goes so fast, what it does to memory and perspective, how to handle it in a piece of work—time is the great mystery a writer grapples with. This one, anyway. So a timepiece, in which the mystery is caught, ordered and beautifully expressed, is a comforting thing to wear. And when a deadline looms as it always does, I want to be able to find out in the most beautiful way just how little time I've got to go.

I don't go in for fancy things. I believe in style, not in fashion. I'm with whoever it was who said that beauty is simplicity in perfection. The most beautiful things work—and go on working—

TRY THIS

- 1 Name the sentence styles McCarthy used in that paragraph I quoted on page 106.
- 2 Write a passage using five different sentence styles, including the ones he's used and one or two others, describing someone you love or admire doing something they love.
- 3 For one or all of the following, write a paragraph or two using the sentence styles I name in brackets.
 - What is the worst fight you ever go into? (Segregating and run-on)
 - What is the best late breakfast you ever had? (Compound—complex and other subordinated sentences)
 - What is the scariest swim you ever made? (Cumulative)
 - What is the most frightening fight you ever took (Segregating and balanced)
 - Did you ever cheat death? Write about it. (Mix)

Wishful thinking

About this far through the final rewrite of this book, I came down the stairs to find the newspaper. Daddy's finished his book', said Henry. A declaratory sentence, disguising a wish. 'I wish I were', I said. Subjunctively.