

Killer Sentence Patterns—The Key to Achieving Variety in Your Writing

One way to achieve variety in the sentences you use in your writing is to examine and collect patterns used by other writers. Once you understand the general idea used in each pattern and the specific punctuation used, you can simply plug in your own words. The following examples each show a different pattern that is briefly annotated. The first six patterns are examples of *sentence nuclei*, the fundamental patterns used for independent clauses in English. (Much of the following material is condensed and adapted from *Doing Grammar*, by Max Morenberg, Oxford University Press, 1997; and *The Art of Styling Sentences*, by Waddell, Esch, and Walker, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1993)

1. The small boy jumped from the high oak tree. (Intransitive verb with adverb phrase)
2. Clark Kent became Superman. (Linking verb with subject complement)
3. The new houses are around the corner. (The verb BE with an adverb phrase of place)
4. The office manager typed the letter. (Transitive verb with direct object)
5. Dennis bought Ann some fancy flowers. (Transitive verb with direct and indirect object)
6. Excessive tax cuts make some people nervous. (Transitive verb with direct object, object complement)
7. Alice, try on this sweater; it seems to be your size. (Compound sentence with semicolon)
8. This lawnmower won't run; therefore, we will return it tomorrow. (Compound sentence with semicolon, conjunctive adverb)
9. For some the math crusade of the 1950s was a disaster; for others, a godsend. (Compound sentence, elliptical construction, omitted verb)
10. Thomas Hardy's book states a harsh truth: women had few rights in Victorian society. (Compound sentence, general statement, colon, specific example)
11. Since unification in Berlin, walls have come down, barriers have been broken, bonds have been formed. (Series with no conjunction. *Use sparingly!*)
12. It's amazing how lifeless elements like stone and wood, nails and plaster, glass and metal take on a soul after you turn them into a house. (--Jane Porcino; series of balanced pairs)
13. An old photograph, a haunting fragrance, a sudden view of a half-forgotten scene—something unexpectedly triggers our nostalgia for the past. (Series of appositives at beginning or end with dashes)
14. My favorite wines—Zinfandel, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir—blend well in making California rose wines. (Internal series of appositives within dashes)
15. Whether one needs fantasy or whether one needs stark realism, the theatre can become a mirror of life. (Dependant clauses in pair or series)
16. We all inhabit a mysterious world—the inner world, the world of the mind. (Repetition of key term)
17. "Porphyria's Lover" captures a moment of time, a moment of passion, a moment of perverse indulgence. (Key term repeated in parallel structure)
18. Discover in the park some unique wildlife that will amaze you: the elusive wolf, the graceful flamingo, the amazing lynx. (Appositive or appositive series after a colon)
19. Philosophy is a series of comments on the ideas of one man—Plato. (Appositive after a dash)
20. Mule deer—once common throughout North America—are now almost extinct. (Interrupting modifier using commas, dashes, or parentheses between subject and verb)
21. Guarding us with their guns, the soldiers at the conference looked ominous. (Participial phrase at the beginning)
22. May through September the city goes bright and fanciful, animated by outdoor cafes. (Participial phrase at the end)
23. The general demanded obedience, instant and unquestioning. (Modifier out of place)
24. By their own follies they perished, the fools. (--Homer; prepositional phrase before subject and verb)
25. His kind of sarcasm I do not like. (Direct object before subject and verb)
26. Famous and wealthy an English professor will never be. (Complement before subject and verb)
27. Down the street and through the mist stumbled the unfamiliar figure. (Inversion of normal word order; can include object, complement or modifier, verb, subject)
28. To accomplish great things, we must not only act, but also dream; not only plan, but also believe. (--Anatole France; paired constructions with correlative conjunctions)
29. How he could fail is a mystery to me. (Dependent clause as subject)
30. Juliet never realizes why her decision to drink the sleeping potion is irrational. (Dependent clause as object)
31. His blanket being torn, Linus cried on Charlie Brown's shoulder. (Absolute construction set off with commas, dashes, or parentheses)
32. I think not. (Short sentence for dramatic effect)
33. What caused the change? (Question for dramatic effect)