Sentence Patterns

This is an overview of sentence patterns to help you identify subjects, verbs, and clause connectors so you can improve your writing by using a variety of sentence patterns.

Subjects, Verbs, and Clauses

A sentence has two parts: a subject and a verb that express a complete thought.
- The subject shows who or what is doing the action. It is always a noun or pronoun.
- The verb shows the action or the state of being. It can be an action verb, like "run," or a being verb, like "seem" or "is."

Examples of simple two-word sentences: Marvin slept.   Dogs bark.   Isotopes react.

Real sentences are rarely so short. We usually want to convey much more information, so we modify the main subject and verb with other words and phrases, as in the sentences below:
- Unfortunately, Marvin slept fitfully.
- Dogs bark louder after midnight.
- Heavy isotopes react slower than light isotopes of the same element.

Despite the extra information, each of these sentences has one subject and one verb, so it's still just one clause.

What's a clause? A **clause** is comprised of a subject and a verb. If a group of words has a subject and verb in it, it's a clause. There are two kinds:
1. **Independent clause**: a subject and verb that make a complete thought. Independent clauses can stand on their own and make sense.
2. **Dependent clause**: a subject and verb that don't make a complete thought. Dependent clauses need to be attached to an independent clause (they're too weak to stand alone).

One more thing: There can be more than one subject or verb in the same clause. These are called "compound" subjects or verbs.
Compound subject (two subjects related to the same verb):
- Javier and his colleagues collaborated on the research article.

Compound verb (two verbs related to the same subject):
- Javier conducted the experiment and documented the results.

Compound subject with **compound verb**:
- Javier, his colleagues, and their advisor drafted and revised the article several times.

Notice that they don't overlap. You can tell that it's only one clause because all of the subjects in one clause come before all of the verbs in the same clause.

Four Basic Patterns

Every sentence pattern below describes a different way to combine clauses. When you are drafting your own papers or when you're revising them for sentence variety, try to determine

how many of these patterns you use. If you favor one particular pattern, your writing might be kind of boring if every sentence has exactly the same pattern. If you find this is true, try to revise a few sentences using a different pattern.

NOTE: Because nouns can fill so many positions in a sentence, it's easier to analyze sentence patterns if you **find the verbs** and **find the connectors**. The most common connectors are listed below with the sentence patterns that use them.

Pattern 1: Simple Sentence
One independent clause (SV): Mr. Potato Head eats monkeys. I refuse.

Pattern 2: Compound Sentence
Two or more independent clauses that can be arranged in these ways:
- Connectors with a comma, the FANBOYS: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so
Example: Mr. Potato Head eats them for breakfast every day, but I don't see the attraction.
- Connectors with a semicolon and comma: however, moreover, nevertheless, therefore
Example: Eating them makes him happy; however, he can't persuade me.

Pattern 3: Complex Sentence
One independent clause PLUS one or more dependent clauses, with connectors at the beginning of the dependent clause that show how the dependent clause is related to the independent clause. This list shows the connectors that indicate those relationships:
- **Cause/Effect**: because, since, so that
- **Comparison/Contrast**: although, even though, though, whereas, while
- **Place/Manner**: how, however, where, wherever
- **Possibility/Conditions**: if, whether, unless
- **Relation**: that, which, who, whom
- **Time**: after, as, before, since, when, whenever, while, until

Examples of complex sentences:
- He recommends them highly because they taste like chicken when they are hot.
- Although chicken always appeals to me, I still feel skeptical about monkey.
- Mrs. Potato Head, because she loves us, has offered to make her special monkey soufflé.

Pattern 4: Compound-Complex Sentence
Two or more independent clauses PLUS one or more dependent clauses with connectors:
Example: Mr. Potato Head said that he would share the secret recipe; however, if he shares it with me, Mrs. Potato Head will feed him to the piranhas, so he is safer, and I am happier if I don't eat monkeys or steal recipes.

Try this: Look for the different sentence patterns in your writing. Do you notice one missing entirely? If so, ask these questions:
- Could you separate some of the more complex sentences?
- Could you combine some of the shorter sentences?
- Can you use different arrangement options for each of the sentence patterns?
- Can you use different connectors if you change the order of the clauses?