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TESOL Connections

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Quick Tip: Sentence Variety and Zombies

by [Terry McLean](#)

As an English as an additional language (EAL) instructor, I am charged with the daunting task of teaching university program-bound international students how to write using a variety of the fabulous four English language sentence types: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. Some students go the choppy route and use too many simple sentences, while others try a little too hard and think that the more complex the better, which does not always get the point or argument across.

This conundrum brings me to my point: depending on the target audience, proficient writers need to craft their messages, and this involves—among other elements, of course—employing sentence variety. If I were a philosophy professor, I would most certainly channel meandering complex structures, whereas if I were a how-to manual writer, I would strive to be more clear and concise. Regardless, vocabulary, voice, tone, and grammar aside, sentence variety is essential in any form of writing.

When I tackle the teaching of the different sentence types, I am inclined to rely on a few useful online resources (see Writing Resources, below) that provide relatively straightforward explanations and instructive examples of simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex patterns. I endeavor to parse classroom activities into manageable, and hopefully enjoyable, steps that lead up to more meaty lessons on paragraph structure, essay mapping, and even the formidable and duly dreaded APA research paper. I find that many concerned students are apt to fret over word count and teeter toward quantity over quality; consequently, I prefer to take the requisite time to review sentence types in any writing class that I teach, regardless of level. Practice may not always make perfect, but it can sure help on the journey.

One activity that affords me the opportunity to see whether or not students can actually produce target forms involves a series of short sentence-writing exercises. For example, I have students write sentences that must follow specific instructions that stipulate type, topic, and if possible, verb form. For example:

1. Write a simple sentence with a compound subject about friends. (past tense)

Ali and Akira played computer games for two hours last night.

2. Write a compound sentence about a Martian. (present perfect)

I have never actually spoken with a Martian; however, I am certainly willing to give it a go.

3. Write a complex sentence about a ghost. (past perfect)

My uncle had already fainted by the time the ghost revealed its name.

4. Write a compound-complex sentence about food. (future)

Christine hates pizza; nevertheless, she will try to make one tonight because she has to feed a pack of famished friends.

Eventually, I encourage students to write sentences about the same topic and emphasize that all four types of sentences can be implemented, resembling tools in their composition arsenal, so to speak. Nonetheless, I realize that developing a piece of writing with a pleasing mix of sentence variety is challenging (and something with which I indeed still struggle); therefore, I give students examples of writing with and without sentence variety.

My subject—zombies. (See my handout, "[Sentence Variety and Zombies](#)" [.pdf])

Overall, my goal is to teach students about the different English sentence types and have them practice using a variety of topics. I know that my students need to eventually dive into the five-paragraph essay, but I encourage developing the skills necessary to combine a variety of sentence types into a convincing paragraph. After all, a solid essay is made up of well-crafted paragraphs, and a decent paragraph is composed of well-honed sentences, hopefully.

So, I show students my sentence type-specific paragraphs about zombies, and we discuss how they are different. We look at the clauses, phrases, coordination, and punctuation. The examples are not great, nor are they academic; nevertheless, I explain that I fancy the last one with sentence variety because it has both complex structures and a few with a short punch. Ultimately, this activity is a launching pad for more challenging paragraphs and essays about topics such as the environment, economics, and mental health.

Writing Sources

- [Composition resources](#) (Basic Composition.com)
- [Guide to grammar and writing](#) (Capital Community College)
- [Sentence types](#) (Purdue Online Writing Lab)
- [Essay map](#) (ReadWriteThink)
- [Kinds of sentences and their punctuation](#) (Townson University)

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