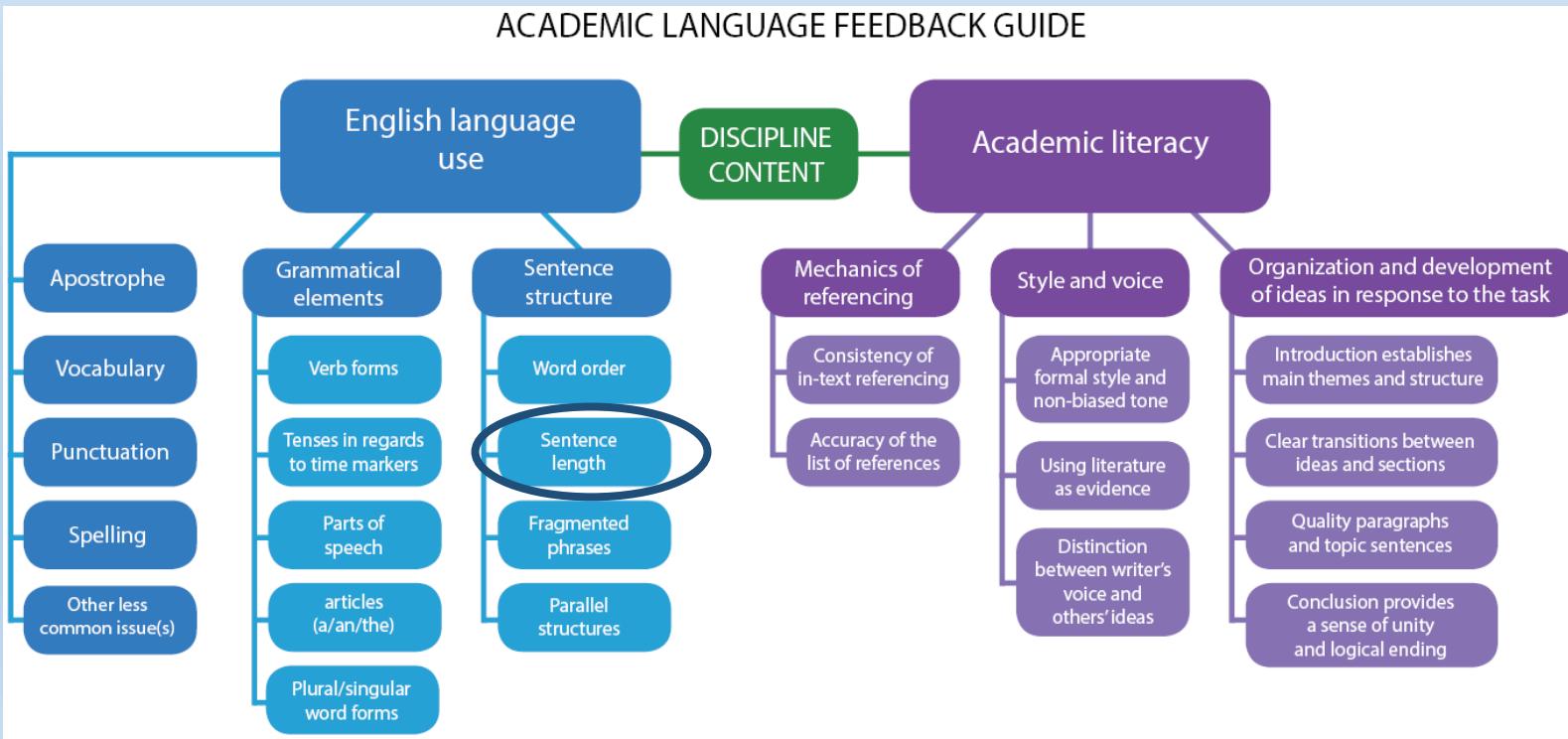


Sentence length



Dr Anna Podorova,
Ms Julia Ghazarian
Dr Amber McLeod
Faculty of Education,
Updated 6 February 2017

Re-visit

What do we mean by ‘sentence length’?

When students begin studying at university, they often write long sentences in their assignments. However, long sentences do not equal good sentences.

Points to consider when writing:

Long sentences

- In long sentences, it may be more difficult for writers to control the sentence structure and the flow of ideas.
- An essay full of too many long sentences, even if they are well-constructed, can become monotonous for the reader.

Short sentences

- Short, choppy sentences can make your writing appear disjointed.

Long sentence review – read and ask yourself:

Does this long sentence have any unnecessary words (redundancies)?

Does this long sentence contain correct punctuation?

Does this long sentence test the patience of the reader?

Example: *Long sentences can test the patience of the reader because the key information contained in the sentence, although it may be written in a grammatically correct form, be properly punctuated and full of well-chosen vocabulary, can be lost in the wall of words that the reader has to digest, thereby requiring the reader to pause regularly to re-read the sentence, subsequently interfering with the connection between important ideas and ultimately obscuring the main message that the writer is intending to convey.*

Sentences may consist of dependent and independent clauses

An independent or main clause can make sense as the main part of a sentence or as a sentence on its own. For example:



Example:

We value writing our assignments. It is important for our university study and our life as professionals in our chosen field. Our chosen field will require us to engage in problem solving.

A dependent clause does not make sense on its own. For example:



Example:

*... because we want to improve our critical thinking.
... so we should be ready for it.*

Remedies for overly long sentences:

1. Break a long sentence into smaller sentences by identifying the independent clauses, or main points.

Example of an overly long sentence:

We value writing our assignments because we want to improve our critical thinking, which is important for our university study and our life as professionals in our chosen field that will require us to engage in problem solving, so we should be ready for it.

Possible revision:

We value writing our assignments as it develops the critical thinking necessary for our university study. Critical thinking also prepares us for problem solving as professionals in our chosen field.

Remedies for overly long sentences:

2. Remove redundant words from the sentence.

Redundancy involves repetition or the addition of information that is unnecessary.

Example:

Each and every student in the study group made no plans whatsoever to meet on a regular and consistent basis. As a result, the study group became subsequently poorly attended and many meetings were postponed until later.

Possible revision:

Each student in the study group made no plans to meet on a regular basis. As a result, the study group became poorly attended and many meetings were postponed.

Short sentences

Sentences of varying length can create interest for the reader. However, if there are too many short, choppy sentences in your writing, you can fail to make important connections between ideas and therefore create an impression that you lack reflectiveness.

Example (5 sentences)

The class were asked to think about their most inspiring leaders. The students were then asked to write what they knew about the characteristics of those leaders. Students were asked to take turns in the role of leader. My role was to observe each student in the leader role. I observed their words, facial expressions and gestures.

Possible revision (2 sentences that make connections)

The class were asked to think about their most inspiring leaders and write down the leaders' characteristics. Students took the role of leader as I observed their words, facial expressions and gestures.

Remedies for short sentences

1. Short sentences can be connected by using conjunctions or joining words. Conjunctions connect words or groups of words and signal different types of connections. For example:

The conjunction *and* signals that you are adding something.

The words *but* will signal a contrast.

Therefore will signal how two items are related to each other.

2. Another method of forming longer sentences from short, choppy ones is to integrate minor details.

Example: *A student in the class asked a question. The student was only six years old. He asked a question about clouds.*

Possible revision: *A six-year-old student in the class asked a question about clouds.*

Quick tips

Quick tips

Consider whether shorter sentences could be joined together in a logical way by using conjunctions and appropriate punctuation.

Check if your sentence is close to the optimal length of 2 – 2.5 lines.

If your sentence is rather long, check if conjunctions and effective punctuation are used to help the reader to follow your ideas. For example, count how many conjunctions “and” you have in each long sentence and revise it if you have more than two.

Learn more

Useful links on sentences

Grammar Quizzes: clause structure

Online Writing Lab, Aims Community

College: Sentence types

<http://vlc.polyu.edu.hk/common/> (try
the grammar questionnaire in the
'Warm up' section, left-side menu)

RMIT Learning Lab: Writing sentences

Module 8: Complex Sentences,
ASCENT, Monash University

Face-to-face support

**Who can help with English at
Monash?**

[English Connect](#) –
conversational circles,
peer feedback on your
writing and grammar
workshops



Resources – grammar books



- Azar, B. S. & Hagen, S.A. (2009). *Understanding and using English grammar* (4th ed.). USA: Pearson Longman.
- Borjars, K. & Burridge, K. *Introducing English grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Hodder Education.
- Foley, M. & Hall, D. (2012). *MyGrammarLab (Advanced)*. England: Pearson.
- Hewings, M. (2012). *Advanced grammar in use: a reference and practice book for advanced students of English* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, R. (2011). *English Grammar in Use (Intermediate)* (3 ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Copyright © Monash University (2017). All rights reserved. Except as provided in the Copyright Act 1968, this work may not be reproduced in any form without the written permission of English Connect web administrator. Material created by Dr Anna Podorova, Ms Julia Ghazarian and Dr Amber McLeod.