

Choppy Sentences

This resource is designed for English Language Learners (ELLs) who require assistance in a particular academic skill. Each handout provides brief explanations related to different core skills (reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking), and it offers some simple examples of mistakes and how these might be corrected.

While these handouts are designed primarily for ELL students, anyone seeking to improve their writing may find these documents useful. Check out the links at the end of the handout for more resources.

What are Choppy Sentences?

Choppy sentences are a series of very short sentences.

How can you tell if you have choppy sentences?

1. Check whether all sentences have simple subjects.
2. Check whether there are any transitional words between the sentences.

Your writing will appear unsophisticated if you write with many choppy sentences. However, you can use these four strategies to improve the flow of your sentences and help the reader understand how your ideas are connected.

Four strategies to fix your choppy sentences

1. Use coordinating conjunctions

Definition

Coordinating conjunctions join two equally important parts of the sentence. You can use the coordinating conjunctions, such as so, yet, but, and, or, nor, for.

<https://www.bbc.com/bitesize/articles/z9wvqhv>

Example

Choppy sentences:

Peter was busy. He could not leave.

Revised:

Peter was busy, **so** he could not leave.

In this example, add the coordinating conjunction “so” to join the two actions “was busy” and “could not leave” by the same agent “Peter.”

2. Use subordination

Change one of the sentences into an **independent clause** (main clause) and the rest a **dependent clause** (subordinate clause) by using subordinating conjunctions.

Definition

An **independent clause** is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. An independent clause can stand alone as a sentence. In other words, it does not need any additional information to operate as a sentence. The sentence "He does not travel" is an example of an independent clause.

<https://www.nmu.edu/writingcenter/independent-dependent-clauses>

Definition

A **dependent clause** is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb but does not express a complete thought. A dependent clause cannot be an independent sentence. For example, "**because** he does not travel" is not a complete sentence. Often a dependent clause is marked by a **subordinating conjunction** such as the marker "because" in the above example.

<https://www.nmu.edu/writingcenter/independent-dependent-clauses>

Definition

A **subordinating conjunction** is a word that connects a dependent clause to an independent clause, such as when, while, before, after, although, as, since.

<https://www.bbc.com/bitesize/articles/zqk37p3>

Example

Choppy sentences:

The girl takes a walk. She listens to music.

Revised:

When the girl takes a walk, she listens to music.

Combine the two short sentences "The girl takes a walk" and "She listens to music" by subordination. The addition of the subordinating conjunction "when" has changed the sentence "The girl takes a walk" into a dependent clause and the sentence "She listens to music" into an independent clause.

3. Use modifying words or phrases

You can use modifying words or phrases like present or past participles or adjectives.

Use a present participle

Definition

The **present participle** of most verbs has the form base+ing. For example, “study” is the base form of the verb “to study.” The present participle of “eat” is “eating.”

<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/verbforms>

Example

Choppy sentences:

She is only eight years old. She dreams of becoming a doctor.

Revised with a present participle:

She is only eight years old, **dreaming** of becoming a doctor.

Join the two short sentences “She was only eight years old” and “She dreamed of becoming a doctor” with the present participle “dreaming.”

Use a past participle

Definition

The **past participle** of most verbs has the form base+ed. For example, “walk” is the base form of the verb “to walk.” The past participle of “walk” is “walked.”

<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/grammar/verbforms>

Example

Choppy sentences:

John was seriously injured. He was hit by a motorcycle.

Revised with a past participle:

John was seriously injured, **hit** by a motorcycle.

In the above example, the choppy sentences can be fixed by adding the past participle “hit” to combine the two sentences “John was seriously injured” and “He was hit by a motorcycle.”

Use an adjective

Definition

An **adjective** is a word that describes or modifies the qualities or states of being of the noun (e.g., giant, smart, red, interesting, slow), or the quantity of the noun (e.g., many, few, millions, eleven). The adjective can also describe or modify pronouns.

<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/adjectives/>

Example

Choppy sentences:

Mary arrived at home at 10:30pm. She was tired. She did not want to cook.

Revised with an adjective:

Mary arrived at home at 10:30pm, too **tired** to cook.

The example shows that the use of the adjective “tired” links the three short sentences into a longer one.

4. Use appositives

Definition

An **appositive** is a noun or a noun phrase that rephrases or explains the noun prior to it.

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/grammar/appositives.html

Example

Choppy sentences:

Alice Munro was the 2013 Noble Prize winner. Alice Munro presented at the International Festival of Authors in Toronto.

Revised:

Alice Munro, **the 2013 Noble Prize winner in literature**, presented at the International Festival of Authors in Toronto.

The insertion of the appositive “the 2013 Noble Prize winner in literature” in between connects the two sentences “Alice Munro was the 2013 Noble Prize winner” and “Alice Munro presented at the International Festival of Authors in Toronto.”

Practice Exercises

Combine each set of sentences below by coordination (using a coordinating conjunction) or subordination (using a subordinating conjunction).

1. The dissertation contains numerous errors. A revision of the dissertation is required. (Use a coordinating conjunction.)
2. Housework is boring. It is time consuming. (Use a coordinating conjunction.)
3. The principle visited a local school. Later, he went to the meeting. (Use a subordinating conjunction.)
4. Some students were dancing. Others were singing. (Use a subordinating conjunction.)
5. The sun was shining. It was chilly. (Use a subordinating conjunction.)
6. Ben arrived late. Ben sat in the back row. (Use a present participle.)
7. The professor entered the classroom. She held a book in her hand. (Use a present participle.)
8. The dog's fur felt smooth. It was brushed with a comb. (Use a past participle.)
9. Kevin finished the marathon. Kevin was exhausted to death. (Use an adjective.)
10. Rio de Janeiro is a city in Brazil. Rio de Janeiro is famous for its Carnival celebration. (Use an appositive.)

Answers

1. A revision of the dissertation is required **because** it contains numerous errors.
2. Housework is boring **and** it is time consuming.
3. **After** visiting a local school, the principle went to the meeting.
4. Some students were dancing **while** others were singing.
5. **Although** the sun was shining, it was chilly.
6. **Arriving** late, Ben sat in the back row.
7. The professor entered the classroom, **holding** a book in her hand.
8. **Brushed** with a comb, the dog's fur felt smooth.
9. Kevin finished the marathon, **exhausted** to death.
10. Rio de Janeiro, **a city in Brazil**, is famous for its Carnival celebration.

More resources for choppy sentences

For Short, Choppy Sentences – Purdue University Online Writing Lab

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/sentence_variety/for_short_choppy_sentences.html

Choppy Sentences – Centre for Writing, University of Minnesota

<http://writing.umn.edu/sws/assets/pdf/quicktips/choppysentences.pdf>

Develop your academic language, improve your academic skills, and get a Co-Curricular Record notation. Attend the Professional English Language Skills (PELS) workshops:

<https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/professional-english-language-skills-pels>

Get feedback on your writing and discuss your thought process. Book an appointment with an instructor:

<http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/appointments-undergraduate>.

Looking for more learning strategies? Visit us at: <http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/asc/>.