

Strategies for Variation

When reading a novel, short story, or academic essay, readers tend to notice if a writer is repeating something. Sometimes, the writing calls for it; a research paper can follow a repetitive formula, or repetition of a phrase or concept emphasizes its importance. However, using variation well can keep the reader engaged, and not using it at all can feel robotic.

Variation in Sentence Openings

When writing a sentence, or a few sentences in a row, try to be varied with what words you use at the start of each.

Keep in mind:

- Some words are extremely common, so there may be some repeats.
- Your goal is to replicate your voice while keeping readers engaged.
- Changing the start of a sentence may create a change in emphasis.

Some examples:

Unvaried: Many think that dinosaurs are extinct. That would be wrong, even though no one has ever seen a live one. That is because they were hidden beneath Antarctica for millennia.

Varied: Many think that dinosaurs are extinct. But those people would be wrong, even though no one has ever seen a live one. That is because they were hidden beneath Antarctica for millennia.

The first example uses the same starting word for two sentences in a row, which is tweaked in the second example.

Unvaried: The next missions to Antarctica failed to find further proof of living dinosaurs. The scientific community was starting to think the original evidence was a hoax. The final mission, however, brought new findings.

Varied: Subsequent missions to Antarctica failed to find further proof of living dinosaurs. Previous evidence was starting to be thought of as a hoax by the scientific community. However, in one last mission, new findings were brought back.

The word "the" is an easy word to place at the start of sentences. However, by rearranging the words slightly, it can be replaced at the beginning.

Variation in Sentence Length

If a piece of writing has only short, to-the-point sentences -- or has only longer -- flowing ones, the pace of the language gets to be boring.

Keep in mind that:

- Different styles of writing will favor some lengths more than others.
- There is no set pattern that sentence lengths must follow.
- Word count and reading pace are not always directly related.

Some examples:

Unvaried: Jo was so excited about finally finding dinosaurs! She wanted so badly to run into the dense jungle. But that would be reckless, she told herself. Who knows what all could be in there?

Varied: Jo was so excited about finding dinosaurs, that she almost ran right into the dense jungle! But that would be reckless, she told herself, and stayed put. Who knows what all could be in there?

Only using shorter sentences creates a bumpy, irregular effect for the reader. The second example reconfigures the paragraph to flow better.