

WRITING POWERFUL SENTENCES (PODCAST 10 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another Effective Writing Podcast. In this episode, I am going to talk about writing powerful sentences.

One good way to keep readers engaged is by varying the way in which ideas are expressed. After you draft and are reasonably sure the writing is saying what you want it to say, spend some time thinking about and tinkering with the way sentences are structured. In particular, concentrate on the lengths of your sentences and the rhythm they create by reading your work aloud and listening—really listening—to the “sound” of your writing, which should be pleasing to the ear. The goal is to compose fluid, rhythmic prose. Too many sentences of the same length or pattern can become monotonous for readers and lull them to sleep. Keep readers engaged not only by the knock-your-socks off content, but also by carrying the way in which your sentences are constructed and the way they move one to the next.

Listen to this example from Gary Provost’s *Make Your Words Work* to understand the power of using sentences of varying lengths:

This sentence has five words. This is five words too. Five word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It’s like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety. Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes when I am certain the reader is rested I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of drums, the crash of symbols, and sounds that say listen to this; it is important.

Can you hear the power of the prose in this example? I am sure you can! My reaction after reading this example has remained the same regardless of the number of times I’ve read it. And my reaction is Wow! The first part—the five word sentence part—contains writing that repeats the same basic pattern using the same number of words and the writing becomes predictable, monotonous and, in a word, BORING! You heard it in your own ears, right?

The second part in Provost’s example contains sentences written in varying lengths, which creates that wonderful, ear-catching rhythm. There’s a beat, a cadence, a sound that is palpable.

The prose engages readers and demands our attention. The writing has energy and verve. As readers we want to continue reading.



While some benefit exists in knowing the different types of sentence structures—simple, compound, complex, compound-complex—such an understanding, however, requires one to know something about clauses and phrases, which, for many, curbs their interest because of the grammatical jargon. The approach I offer here is to focus your attention on sentence lengths. When you are done drafting and at a point to pay attention to issues of finesse, make sure your sentences are of varying lengths—short, medium, long, and perhaps very long. Read your work aloud—I can't impress this upon you enough—read your work out loud and listen to the sound and movement of your writing. If a word sounds flat, change it. If a transition sounds clunky, rework it. If it sounds dull, spice it up—change some words, add a few details, combine the sentences with another sentence, and on and on. Tinker with the prose. Move parts around and read your revision aloud until your prose sings off the page and brings a smile to your face. Writing is a process and a process takes time, so you have to commit yourself to that kind of work, but the end result, the power of your sentences, will be well worth the effort.

Try this experiment: Locate one of your papers, and find a representative paragraph. Then count the words in each and every sentence and write those numbers in the margin. Let's say you have a series of numbers like this: 7, 9, 12, 15, 13, 9, 12. The question is, is this enough variety? It's clear that the sentences aren't of the same length, but is there enough variation? Do you think such writing would have what I will term the "Provost Effect"? One way to find out for yourself is to read those sentences—you guessed it—out loud. Listen to the sound those sentences make. Is there a good rhythm? Do you want to snap your fingers? No? How come?

In all likelihood, a paragraph with sentences 7, 9, 12, 15, 13, 9, and 12 words will not offer enough variation as most of the sentences are of similar length. You need to do better—and I am sure you can, but it does take a little extra effort. It's a bit like waxing your car—how many of you do that? Most people wash their cars, but not as many put in the extra effort to wax it as well. But what happens to your car when it's waxed? It shines, right?

Varying your sentence lengths will help you write sentences that are more powerful because they will be more engaging, and as a result, your writing will shine.

Thanks, everyone. Happy writing.

