Writing Effective Sentences

Coordination and Subordination

We often combine sentences using "all-purpose" conjunctions such as and or so. However, this practice often leads to ambiguity. Consider the following sentence.

> Canada has worked as a youth counselor, and he understands what teens face.

The meaning of this sentence is not clear. The sentence could have two somewhat different meanings:

> Because Canada has worked as a youth counselor, he understands what teens face.

> Because Canada understands what teens face, he has worked as a youth counselor.

The first example sentence links two ideas with and, a coordinating conjunction. The second example sentences link two ideas with because, a subordinating conjunction. These examples show two ways of combining ideas in a sentence: a coordinating conjunction gives the ideas equal emphasis, and a subordinating conjunction emphasizes one idea more than another.

Coordination Relates "Equal" Ideas

Coordination gives equal emphasis to different ideas in a sentence. Coordinating conjunctions (*and, but, for, nor, or, so,* and *yet*) or a semicolon. (The semicolon is often used with a conjunctive adverb such as therefore, moreover, or however.)

> The Los Angeles River is full of trash *and* needs to be cleaned up.

> We need to reduce emissions of toxic gas, *or* cancer rates will continue to climb.

> We all want cleaner air*; however*, solutions can be expensive.

Subordination Emphasizes "Main" Ideas

Subordination allows you to distinguish between more important and less important information, or to bring in supporting detail. Subordination also establishes logical relationships amongst ideas.

Of course, the writer decides which ideas in a sentence are more important and which are less important, and what the logical relationship is between ideas. The choice made by the writer can produce varying effects as shown in the following examples (the part of the sentence receiving less emphasis is shown in italics):

> The Rheedlin Centers provide counseling and activities, *which are available for the whole community*.

> The Rheedlin Centers, *which are available for the whole community*, provide counseling and activities.

Of the two sentences above, the second one probably comes closer to conveying the relationship between less and more important ideas. The parts in italics are called subordinate (or dependent) clauses, and are easily identified by the fact that unlike an independent clause, they cannot stand alone as a sentence. Subordinate clauses contain "subordinate" or less important information and typically begin with one of the following subordinating conjunctions or relative pronouns:

{PRIVATE}after	if	though	while
although	in order that	unless	who
as	once	until	whom
as if	since	when	whose
because	so that	where	
before	than	whether	
even though	that	which	

Eliminating Choppy Style

Because short sentences command the reader's attention, they should be used occasionally and only for emphasis. Many short sentences together give a starting and stopping rhythm to the prose, what some call a "choppy" style. Subordination and coordination is the key to eliminating choppy style.

Sentences can often be combined using coordinating conjunctions. If the idea expressed by the sentence is not important enough to deserve its own sentence, then try to combine it with the preceding or following sentence. If the idea expressed is minor, put it into a subordinate clause.

{PRIVATE} choppy	Geoff borrows Mike's basketball. He accidentally hits a man's car with the ball. The man gets mad at Geoff. The ball is taken away. Because he is worried about losing Mike's basketball, Geoff tries to get the ball back from the man. Mike finds out about the basketball. He threatens him. He returns it.
improved	Geoff borrows Mike's basketball and accidentally hits a man's car with it. The owner of the car gets mad at Geoff and takes the ball away. Because he is worried about losing Mike's basketball, Geoff tries to get the ball back. When Mike finds out, he threatens the man who then returns the ball.

Choosing between Coordination and Subordination

As the above examples show, coordination and subordination produce very different results, and yet inexperienced writers often have difficulty deciding which is appropriate. Keep in mind these important points when choosing between coordination and subordination:

- Are the ideas to be connected equally important? If so, use coordination.
- Is one idea less important than the other? If so, use subordination.
- Can a coordinating conjunction (*and, or, but*) clearly signal the relation between the ideas? If so, use it. If not, use subordination.

Below are some examples of improved sentences through the use of coordination and subordination.

{PRIVATE}Before	After
Butchie is known as a "man-child" and he doesn't like to fight.	Butchie, a "man-child," doesn't like to fight. The less important idea has become an appositive phrase.
Kevin fights the big man and the boys admire his heart.	Because Kevin fights the big man, the boys admire his "heart." The less important idea has become a subordinate clause beginning with *Because*.
Canada tried to fix the broken zipper on a young boy's jacket, and he failed so he showed the boy how to hold his jacket closed.	After failing to fix the zipper, Canada teaches the young boy how to hold his jacket closed. The less important idea has been changed into a gerund phrase beginning with the subordinator *After*.
Canada offers five proposals, which he believes will reduce violence if they are enacted because the proposals provide solutions to the root causes of violence.	Canada offers five proposals, which if enacted will reduce violence. Canada argues that these proposals provide solutions to the root causes of violence. Excessive subordination was eliminated by breaking up a long sentence into two shorter ones.

Parallelism

"In matters of principle, stand like a rock; in matters of taste, swim with the current"

—Thomas Jefferson—

Often times we present two or more ideas as parallel to one another. By parallel we mean that the ideas are equal in some way, such as in emphasis, in use, or in fact. Parallelism is most common in lists, such as those denoting sequences of related activities:

> In the morning he gets dressed, eats breakfast, brushes his teeth, and then kisses his mother goodbye.
>
> She has learned to stand tall, hold her head steady, establish a rhythm with the dribble, and steady herself before shooting.

When ideas exist in a parallel structure, but are expressed in unparallel syntactical structures, the result is an awkward sentence:

> In the morning he gets dressed, breakfast is then served, brushes his teeth, and kisses his mother goodbye.
>
> She has learned to stand tall, holding her head steady and establishing a rhythm with the dribble, all of which goes toward steadying herself before shooting.

Parallel Structure Expresses Parallel Ideas

Simple parallel structure joins ideas of equal importance. However, that relationship is not always the and relationship shown in the examples above. Coordinating conjunctions (*and, but, or, so,* and *yet*) and correlative conjunctions (*either . . . or, both . . . and, neither . . . nor, not . . . but, not only . . . but also, just as . . . so,* and *whether . . . or*) can be used to express more complex relationships between ideas. In other words, parallel does not mean that the ideas are the same, but rather that they are equal in importance. (This last sentence uses the correlative conjunction *not . . . but* to create a parallel structure.) To create sentences using parallel structure, the parts of the sentence that express the ideas must share the same syntactical structure.

Coordinating Conjunctions (*and, but, or, so,* and *yet*)

Here are some examples of parallel structures using coordinating conjunctions.

> The Crime Bill proposes to hire more police *and* build more prisons.
>
> The police take criminals off the streets, *but* this security takes a toll on the neighborhood.
>
> The public believes in more police and prisons and *so* fails to see other solutions.
>
> For most kids guns are a means of protection, *yet* for Canada they are a guarantee of violence.

Correlative Conjunctions (*either . . . or, both . . . and, neither . . . nor, not . . . but, not only . . . but also, just as . . . so,* and *whether . . . or*)

Here are some examples of parallel structures using correlative conjunctions.

> Canada realizes that *either* we deal with the violence in this country *or* we will lose our democratic freedoms.
>
> Violence is the product of *both* genetics *and* environment.
>
> The media is partially to blame for they *neither* control the content of their products *nor* accept responsibility for the results.
>
> Canada urges all of us to be heroes, *not* to suggest that we need to be like Superman, utopia is an impossible dream, *but* to suggest that we are already Supermen and Superwomen.
>
> Youth programs offer community for teens, *not only* in the shared activities, *but also* in the conversations, discussions, and fellowship.
>
> *Just as* Mike shows Geoff how to negotiate the streets, *so* Canada teaches his students how to survive on the streets.
>
> *Whether* we will conquer violence, *or* violence conquers us, is up to us.

This handout made extensive use of the following sources:

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>
> Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*. 2nd ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001.
>
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