Sentence Rhetoric: Standard, Periodic, and Balanced Sentences

The Standard Sentence:

This is by far the most common sentence; both the other types—the periodic and the balanced—are derived from its basic subject-predicate pattern. The writer of the standard sentence begins with the main clause (the subject and predicate) and expands it by adding further information.

In the following examples of standard sentences, the main clause is underlined to set it off from the added elements:

I was on the fattish side as an infant, with a scow-like beam and noticeable jowls.

I’ll just tell you about this mad-man stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run down and had to come out here and take it easy.

In such sentences the contents unfold a bit at a time. First we have the main clause. The sentence can then be expanded by three grammatical processes—modification, coordination, and subordination.

1. Modification:

Any element in a basic sentence can be modified by adjectives, adverbs, phrases, or clauses which describe or limit the element modified. In the following example sentences the modifiers are in parentheses and are connected by arrows to the elements they modify.

(Stray) dogs are becoming a (serious) nuisance (in our neighborhood).

We were awakened (about two o’clock in the morning) by a (loud) quarrel (between a man and woman) (in the next motel room).

These modifiers enable the writer to enrich the sentence by adding specific details, thus making the writing less general, more specific.

Here are some additional sentences with added modification. (The modifiers are underlined.)

Somehow my strongest memories of San Francisco are of me in a rented sedan roaring up hills or down hills, sliding on and off the cable-car tracks.

The drug companies, usually operating through private physicians with access to the prisons, can obtain healthy human subjects living in conditions that are difficult, if not impossible, to duplicate elsewhere.
No matter which direction they move in, few travelers will find a better-appointed airport than Amsterdam’s Schiphol—clean, white, modern, uncrowded, and equipped with one of the best-appointed, free-port shopping areas in the world.

Exercise 1: Developing a standard sentence with modifiers

The following sentences are incomplete communications in that they do not contain enough specific details to make them clear or interesting by themselves.

Following the example given below, expand these five sentences into more fully developed one by adding modifiers. (Because the answers will vary so much, they should be checked by your instructor)

Example: His attitude was indefensible.

His attitude towards women’s rights was indefensible, because he either could not or would not reexamine his nineteenth-century stereotypes about men and women an their relationships in a modern society.

1. My parents are greatly concerned about what is happening to me. (Why?)
2. Women are physically superior to men. (In what way?)
3. There is a double standard on this campus. (What kind?)
4. College students should be given greater responsibility. (For what?)
5. Everybody ought to have a basic knowledge of chemistry. (Why?)

II. Coordination:

In addition to modification, a sentence can be made more specific by two other methods: coordination and subordination. Unlike modification, these do not add more information, but combine the information of two or more basic sentences into one.

For example, instead of writing, “Wire-tapping is one kind of invasion of privacy. Breaking-and-entering is another”, we can combine the two sentences into one by compounding the subjects and giving them a common predicate: “Wire-tapping and breaking-and-entering are both invasions of privacy.” Or instead of writing, “At the army surplus sale a shovel could be bought for a dollar. A compass costs a dollar. A dollar would buy a trench knife” we can combine the subjects in a series and give them all the same predicate: “At the army surplus sale a shovel, a compass, and a trench knife could be bought for a dollar each.” Combining basic sentences in this way has the advantage of reducing wordiness and monotony, without loss of meaning.
Exercise 2:

Rewrite the following sentences by using coordination but being careful not to lose any meaning. (Because the answers will vary, have your instructor check them.)

1. I am in favor of equal rights for women. I think women should be able to compete with men for jobs for which they are qualified. They ought to get the same pay as men for the same job. Women should have equal opportunities for promotion.
2. A deep, harsh note boomed under the palms. It spread through the intricacies of the forest. Then it echoed back from the pink granite of the mountains.
3. I am a noisy audience in a theater. I move my body and feet without knowing it. I crack the knuckles of my hands. And I cough.

III. Subordination:

Subordination is a way of reducing the grammatical rank of a basic sentence so that it can be included as part of another.

--by reducing one of the sentences to a phrase:

The man was evidently in great pain. He was taken to a hospital.

The man, evidently in great pain, was taken to the hospital.

--by combining two sentences into one:

We left early. We had work to do.

We left early because we had work to do.

Exercise 3:

1. Combine the following five sentences into one by subordination of some of the information: (Because the answers will vary greatly, they should be checked by your instructor)

   Last summer I camped for a week in a Manitoba forest. Three friends were with me. We were north of Lake Winnipeg. We camped on a small lake. We were fifty miles from the nearest settlement.

2. Combine the following three sentences into one by using subordination. (Have your instructor check them for you)

   We stayed here for five days without seeing anyone else. Then two men came in a canoe. We saw no one else while we were there.
The Periodic Sentence:

A periodic sentence is one that suspends its grammatical completion until the end, usually with subject and verb widely separated, and the verb as near to the end as possible.

Examples: (The main clauses are underlined.)

Prince Hamlet, summoned home from Wittenberg for his father’s funeral and disgusted at his mother’s too-hasty remarriage to his uncle, is bitter enough to long for death.

Ralph, having walked the whole seven miles, haven gotten thoroughly soaked in a downpour, and then finding no one at the cabin, was, to say the least, disappointed.

Another type of periodic sentence is one which builds up, often through two or more parallel constructions, to a climax by holding the main cause until the end. The following sentence illustrates this structure. (The main clause, given at the end, is underlined)

On the other side of the city, far from the bright lights of downtown with its glamour and expensive cars, safe in the sanctuary of the suburban neighborhood, there is a grimy poolroom that is lit too brightly.

As we saw above, a standard (loose, cumulative) sentence begins with a main clause; a periodic sentence reverses the standard order. But the difference between them is more than a change in order. There are also differences in procedure and effect. In a standard sentence a writer may work out the sentence while writing it, starting with the main clause and clarifying it by adding necessary modifications. But in a periodic sentence the writer must know from the beginning how it will end.

Take the following example: (The main clause is underlined.)

The boldness with which she could parade herself and yet never be gross, her sexual flamboyance which yet breathed an air of mystery and even reticence, her voice which carried such ripe overtones of erotic excitement and yet was the voice of a shy child—these complications were integral to her gift.

The author could have written the sentence in the standard order, starting with the main clause and following it with a series of apparent inconsistencies. But had he done so, the force of the main clause would have been weakened.

Here are a few more periodic sentences for your study:

From breakfast to lunch, from lunch to dinner, from dinner to midnight snack, he is thinking of only one thing, the next meal.
If our rights are meaningless, if it is inconceivable that our society have treaties with your society, even though those treaties were signed by honorable men on both sides, in good faith, long before the present government decided to tear them up as worthless scraps of paper, then we as a people are meaningless.

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before the coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet, and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street and methodically knocking people’s hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

Exercise 4:

Convert these sentences into periodic ones by altering the subject-predicate structure. (Because the answers will vary, they should be checked by your instructor.)

1. Some firemen began carrying guns when they were frightened by the chaos of riots.
2. The poet John Keats dies slowly and horribly in 1821 of tuberculosis.
3. The old courthouse stands on the north side of the square, darkened by time and swarming with pigeons.
4. The old man finally fell asleep after talking and telling family anecdotes for two hours.
5. Educated people are all self-educated, having read, marked, and inwardly digested many books.
6. Karen got nothing for Christmas after all the days of being good, after all the promises and all the fantasies of beautiful gifts.
7. I especially like that kind of wine.
8. He chose red suspenders, of all things.
9. The worlds revolve like ancient women gathering fuel in vacant lots.
10. He wanted to be remembered as a fair and just man, more than riches, more than fame, more even than happiness.

The Balanced Sentence:

A balanced sentence is one in which two parallel structures are set off against each other like the weights on a balance scale. In each of the following sentences the underlined parts illustrate the balance:

Many are called but few are chosen.

Beauty without grace is the hook without the bait.

We undertook this project to promote intercollegiate debate, not to kill it.
In reading these sentences aloud, one tends to pause between the balanced parts. The pause is often marked by coordinating conjunction (and, but, or, nor, yet), sometimes by “not”, (as in the third sentence above), and sometimes by punctuation alone, as in:

The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little. (Pause at the semicolon)

The balanced structure is most frequently used to establish a contrast. It is an effective structure to use when, as in an alternating comparison, two subjects are being contrasted within the same sentence, as in:

A man dies on shore; his body remains with his friends, and “the mourners about the streets”; when a man falls overboard at sea and is lost, there is a suddenness in the event…which gives it an air of mystery.

The balanced structure points up the contrast. But it is a sentence that should be used sparingly and for special effects. If over-used, especially if it is used consistently through a long paragraph, it is likely to seem “artsy” and affected.

Here are two more examples of balanced sentences for your study:

To be late occasionally may be attributed to circumstance; to be late consistently must be attributed to character.

They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.

Exercise 5:

Mark each of the following sentences as standard (S), periodic (P), or balanced (B):

1. Art is long, but life is short.
2. The waters of the pond, I knew, were already churning themselves in the warming air.
3. Gray ice lay melting in the bottoms of shallow, leaf-lined pools that in a matter of weeks would be dried, when the real sun returned.
4. I came, I saw, I conquered.
5. I have three chairs in my house: one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.
6. Man proposes, God disposes.
7. Read not to contradict or confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.
8. That he was guilty, that he could have committed the things he was accused of, I never for a moment believed.
9. Next morning when the first light came into the sky and the sparrows stirred in the trees, when the cows rattled their chains and the rooster crowed and the early automobiles went whispering along the road, Wilbur awoke and looked for Charlotte.

10. They had hopelessly come to believe with absolute certainty war would never end.
Answers

Exercises 1, 2, 3, and 4 all have several possible answers. Have your instructor check them for you.

Exercise 5:

1. B
2. S
3. S
4. B
5. S
6. B
7. B
8. P
9. P
10. S