GWT Component 4: Sentence Structure & Word Choice

Sentence structure

Uncomplicated writing is preferable for the GWT, but don't fall into a predictable pattern of using the same sentence forms repeatedly. The following excerpt taken from *Models for Writers* (2012) is a paragraph that lacks sentence variety:

> Water surrounds Vancouver on three sides. The snow-crowned Coast Mountains ring the city on the northeast. Vancouver has a floating quality of natural loveliness. There is a curved beach at English Bay. This beach is in the shape of a half moon. Residential high-rises stand behind the beach. They are in pale tones of beige, blue, and ice-cream pink. Turn-of-the-century houses of painted wood frown upward at the glitter of office towers. Any urban glare is softened by folds of green lawns, flowers, fountains, and trees. Such landscaping appears to be unplanned. It links Vancouver to her ultimate treasure of greenness. That treasure is thousand-acre Stanley Park. Surrounding stretches of water dominate. They have image-evoking names like False Creek and Lost Lagoon. Sailboats and pleasure raft skim blithely across Burrard Inlet. Foreign freighters are out in English Bay. They await their turn to take on cargoes of grain.

The sentences in this paragraph all follow a monotonous pattern of subject + predicate. Additionally, the sentences are generally short and too similar in length, which results in a boring and often disruptive flow of thoughts. It is also more difficult for the reader to understand the relationship of one sentence to another when the sentences are all strung together in a chain of seemingly equally important components.

Here is the same paragraph, revised by editors Alfred Rosa and Paul Eschholz (*Models for Writers*) to improve sentence variety:

> [1]Surrounded by water on three sides and ringed to the northeast by the snow-crowned Coast Mountains, Vancouver has a floating quality of natural loveliness. (participial phrase) [2]At English Bay, the half-moon curve of beach is backed by high-rises in pale ones of beige, blue, and ice-cream pink. [3]Turn-of-the-century houses of painted wood frown upward at the glitter of office towers. [4]Yet any urban glare is quickly softened by folds of green lawns, flowers, fountains, and trees that in a seemingly unplanned fashion link Vancouver to her ultimate treasure of greenness— thousand-acre Stanley Park. [5]And always it is the surrounding stretches of water that dominate, with their image-evoking names like False Creek and Lost Lagoon. [6]Sailboats and pleasure craft skim blithely across Burrard Inlet, while out in English Bay foreign freighters await their turn to take on cargoes of grain.

Notice that in this improved version, only two sentences (3 and 6) follow the often overused pattern of subject + predicate. The rest of the sentences in this paragraph demonstrate a variety of sentence patterns, sentences beginnings, and sentence lengths, which leads to

greater interest and complexity of thought. Here are examples of some of the sentence combining strategies that you can use to achieve these effects:

1. Participials

Before: *Water surrounds Vancouver on three sides. The snow-crowned Coast Mountains ring the city on the northeast. Vancouver has a floating quality of natural loveliness.*

After: *Surrounded by water on three sides and ringed to the northeast by the snow-crowned Coast Mountains, Vancouver has a floating quality of natural loveliness.*

By using past participial forms of the verbs *surrounds* and *rises,* the writer was able to combine three sentences into one, achieving better sentence variety as well placing emphasis on the most important idea (*Vancouver has a floating quality…*).

2. Adjective and adverb phrases

Before: *There is a curved beach at English Bay. This beach is in the shape of a half moon. Residential high-rises stand behind the beach. They are in pale tones of beige, blue, and ice-cream pink.*

After: *At English Bay, the half-moon curve of beach is backed by high-rises in pale tones of beige, blue, and ice-cream pink.*

Rather than using a succession of short sentences that each describes a single aspect of the bay, the writer incorporated these adjectives more concisely into one sentence. Also, by moving the adverb phrase *At English Bay,* the writer achieved a better variety of sentence beginnings.

3. Relative clauses

Before: *Any urban glare is softened by folds of green lawns, flowers, fountains, and trees. Such landscaping appears to be unplanned. It links Vancouver to her ultimate treasure of greenness.*

After: *Yet any urban glare is quickly softened by folds of green lawns, flowers, fountains, and trees that in a seemingly unplanned fashion link Vancouver to her ultimate treasure of greenness.*

By combining two other related sentences and converting them into a single relative clause (descriptive clauses beginning with *who, whom, whose, that,* or *which*), the writer more concisely showed the relationships between parts of sentences.

4. Appositives (nouns or noun phrases that explain or identify other noun phrases)

Before: *It links Vancouver to her ultimate treasure of greenness. That treasure is thousand-acre Stanley Park.*

After: …*link Vancouver to her ultimate treasure of greenness—<u>thousand-acre Stanley Park.</u>*

Rather than using two short sentences that describe the same location, <u>the</u> writer combine<u>d</u> them by identifying the place using an appositive (*thousand-acre Stanley Park*) immediately after the description of it (*ultimate treasure of greenness*).

5. Prepositional phrases

Before: *Surrounding stretches of water dominate. They have image-evoking names like False Creek and Lost Lagoon.*

After: *And always it is the surrounding stretches of water that dominate, <u>with their image-evoking names like False Creek and Lost Lagoon.</u>*

The writer transformed the second sentence into a prepositional phrase in order to combine the two related sentences into a single effective one.

6. Subordinating conjunctions

Before: *Sailboats and pleasure craft skim blithely across Burrard Inlet. Foreign freighters are out in English Bay. They await their turn to take on cargoes of grain.*

After: *Sailboats and pleasure craft skim blithely across Burrard Inlet, <u>while</u> out in English Bay foreign freighters await their turn to take on cargoes of grain.*

Using a subordinating conjunction allowed the writer to better show the relationship and relative importance of each of the original sentences.

Diction: Word choice and usage

Other common causes of problems at the sentence level are wordiness and generality. Some college writers, introduced to advanced-level textbooks and journal articles, conclude that the key to writing at the college level is to formulate long, convoluted sentences packed with unnecessary and ineffective words. However, doing so can detract from a writer's message. For the GWT, writing straightforward, concise sentences is the best approach. Here are two steps you can take to write more concisely at the sentence level:

1. Eliminate the obvious or excessive

While details are important to include, oftentimes writers can get caught up in providing too much information that is unimportant or unnecessary. The examples below demonstrate how writers can succinctly express their ideas without a long, elaborate wind-up.

Before: The email that I read explained why the teacher of my class cancelled tomorrow's lecture.

After: The email explained why the teacher cancelled tomorrow's lecture. (6 fewer words

Before: In this paragraph is a demonstration of the use of good style in the writing of a report.

After: This paragraph demonstrates good style in report writing. (10 fewer words)

2. Avoid repetition and redundancy

In addition to avoiding similarity in overall sentence structure, writers must also be mindful not to pad their sentences with words that are too similar.

A. Be selective about the words included as many of them are synonyms and repetitive as in the case for the underlined words in the sentence below.

The courageous, brave soldier continued to fight and battle despite the overwhelming barrage of enemy fire.

B. There are also words that are unnecessary since they are categorically part of another word. For the example below, each underlined word is actually part of the category of another.

The tables in the classroom were round in shape and blue in color.

3. Use specific, concrete language

To help the reader understand meaning and intent, writers should select words that provide more precise information that general, vague words do not.

Using concise words can help a writer to convey a specific image.

The odd-looking man walked down the street. [Unclear—what was so odd about the way he looked? How was he walking?]

The disheveled man stumbled down the street. [More precise visual image]

Specific word choice can also project a writer's attitude. In the following sentences, can you determine the writer's attitude about these people based on specific word choice?

Hordes of people were griping about the pending enactment of new parking laws.

Protestors were registering their objection to the pending enactment of new parking laws.

You could probably sense that the writer had a more negative attitude toward the people in the first sentence due to word choice. Using this strategy is effective since the writer is able to communicate his/her opinion more subtlety thus avoiding the need to state "I believe" or "I think" to express his/her stance.

Considering audience

When you are discussing with your friends about which movie to see, it is unlikely that you would say, "Confronted with the cinematic options available for our viewing, I am ambivalent about our choices." Familiar with your audience of friends, you know that it's perfectly acceptable to use informal language and slang with them.

But the audience that will be reading your GWT essay is not a group of friends, and the GWT is a test of your ability to write in a more formal academic style. Consequently, you should avoid colloquial expressions and slang. Instead, use words that are appropriate for an academic audience.

Too informal: It really pissed me off when my manager didn't give me the weekend off
                  even after he said he was down with it earlier.

Appropriate: I was angered when my manager changed his mind and didn't give me the
                  weekend off as he had promised earlier.

Rosa, Alfred and Paul Eschholz. *Models for Writers*. Bedford St. Martins: Boston, MA: 2012.