



Sentence Combining

An Easy First Step

When one sentence begins with the same word or phrase with which the previous sentence ends, the sentences can almost always be combined:

“Plate tectonics constantly shape the earth. The earth is growing and changing as tectonic plates push each other upwards and, in other places, are subsumed.”

Pointing out to students that a simple “which” here would allow for a single sentence rather than two creates a greater fluidity among sentences.

“Plate tectonics constantly shape the earth, which grows and changes as tectonic plates push each other upwards and, in other places, are subsumed.”

Let Students Do The Work

Your temptation might be to cross out the second “the earth” and write “which” there. But that approach does not clarify your reason for this change. Instead, asking students to take a list of sentence-combining suggestions and do that work themselves – even if they miss certain combining opportunities – will improve their writing more than your comments will, and it will save you time too.

Count the Words

Varied sentence lengths can also make writing feel more fluid and sophisticated, but students may not notice repeated lengths and structures.

To notice repeated structures, ask students to count the number of words in each sentence of a paragraph or page. After listing a count, students should note if all of their sentences are 7-10 words long, if they alternate among lengths, or if none of their sentences are fewer than 20 words.

Next, have them consider the structures. Is each short sentence just “subject, verb, object”? How could the writer combine sentences to alternate that pattern?

Creating Variety

The simplest adjustment involves adding a coordinating conjunction between two sentences, especially if they share a subject. But encourage students to try more



complex structures, like beginning with a subordinate conjunction or using an appositive phrase. Can one sentence become an introductory clause or modifier for another?

Ask them to play around with their own sentences, independently or with a partner, to create greater numeric variety. Then have them reread to see whether the changes increase that elusive “flow” or make their writing sound more polished.

Adapt For Your Classroom

If a whole class struggles with sentence variety, I’ll assign this activity for homework, but if the problem is limited to a few students, I might make it a mandate, perhaps while giving other students their own targeted tasks.

Keep in mind that a student may compose exclusively short, single-clause sentences while another may write mostly long, overblown sentences. Each of these approaches is problematic in its own way, and this activity can improve both simplistic and overly complicated writing.