

Use this handout if you have been encouraged to work on your style, or if you simply feel that your paper feels and sounds a bit flat.

Sentence **VARIETY**:

Eight Techniques to Make Your Prose Livelier and More Memorable

Technique #1: Vary the length of your sentences, alternating short and to-the-point sentences with longer, more complex ones. Reading your papers aloud can help you to catch places where your sentences have fallen into a monotonous rhythm.

I went camping for the first time last summer. I never camped before, because my family is un-athletic. My family prefers "relaxing," which only includes a few activities.

Last summer, I camped for the first time. I missed out on camping as a child because my family is not just un-athletic but about as sedentary as you can get. In my family, a "good time" equals relaxing – and only a few activities qualify.

Notice how the example on the left sounds choppy, while the example on the right sounds more natural. That is because, in the right-hand example, the writer has varied the length of her sentences, creating a more conversational tone.

Technique #2: Amplification – the repetition of a key word, with the gradual addition of more details – to emphasize a point.

After ten days of overly rigorous dieting, I had visions of ice cream.

After ten days of overly rigorous dieting, I had visions of ice cream – mountains of creamy, luscious ice cream, chocolate and vanilla, dripping with gooey hot fudge syrup and many millions of calories.

The example on the left conveys information but little more. The example on the right uses amplification to help the reader visualize key details. Use this device when you want your audience to linger over an image or idea.

Technique #3: Anaphora. This is another device that uses repetition, but here, the idea is to repeat the same words at the beginning of successive clauses or sentences.

They kept walking, not knowing if the mugger was still pointing the gun at them, where to contact the police, or whether they would soon die.

They kept walking, not knowing if the mugger was still pointing the gun at them, not knowing where to contact the police, not knowing whether they might soon die.

The repetition of "not knowing" in the sentence on the right lends the sentence strong forward momentum, while emphasizing uncertainty and suspense.

Technique #4: Parallelism, the expression of two ideas through identical grammatical structures.

It was the best time in history, but it was a terrible time, as well.

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.

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Notice how the sentences on the left sound awkward, whereas the sentences on the right have a pleasing rhythm. Use this device freely, especially when you want to break up the rhythm of a long or dense paragraph.

Technique #5: Antithesis, the expression of two contrasting ideas through grammatical structures.

The blueprint calls for a wall that is thick, strong, light, and moveable.

The blueprint calls for a wall that is thick and strong but also light and moveable.

Antithesis is a special type of parallelism. Use this device when you're trying to boil a complex contradiction down to the simplest possible terms.

Technique #6: Expletives. An expletive is a relatively meaningless word or phrase that writers use to stop the forward momentum of a sentence and thereby give special, emphatic thrust to the words or phrases that are before and after the expletive.

The lake was not drained in April.

The lake was not, in fact, drained in April.

Use this device when you want to call special attention to a particular group of words. Useful expletives include *after all, anyway, as I said, assuredly, generally, I hope, I suppose, naturally, obviously, indeed, moreover, importantly.*

Technique #7: Qualification. This device qualifies a statement or part of statement by calling it back and expressing it in a better way, either more strongly or more mildly or just differently.

Of course, my visions of ice cream were not hallucinations; at no time did I believe that a bowl of ice cream hovered before me.

Use this device to anticipate an objection or complicate a bold, emphatic declaration.

Technique #8: Hypophora. This device for making transitions involves asking one or more questions and then proceeding to answer them, usually at some length. The most common usage is to ask a question at the beginning of a paragraph, and then devote the remainder of the paragraph to answering the question.

Can we harness the positive potential of stereotypes and use these mental shortcuts to expect the best of our fellow citizens, rather than the worst?

This device works well, but don't overuse it. Long strings of rhetorical questions make your prose sound singsong, and multiple transitions that rely on rhetorical questions make your prose predictable.