This sheet is designed for those students who have a firm grasp on the basic mechanics of writing but who are looking for ways to fine-tune their papers stylistically. Let’s assume that a paper has a solid, interesting thesis, effective organization, and flawless grammar and punctuation. The following guidelines are to help you make an already good paper more stylistically mature and, therefore, more enjoyable to read. Remember as you read that all of these sentence could be changed and rearranged in a number of ways; each sentence serves as an example, not the example.

1. Vary Sentence Patterns

The key to interesting writing lies mainly in variety. Obviously, since a paper is comprised of a string of sentences, one of the best ways to lend a paper variety is to use different sentence structures. To do this, break from the normal pattern of subject-verb-object and try coordination and subordination.

Coordination: the joining of simple sentences to form compound sentences (using coordinating conjunctions like and, but, or, for, nor, yet), or the joining of similar elements of different sentences (e.g., combining the subjects of two sentences if they perform the same action).

**good**: Mrs. Whitesell teaches College Writing. She also directs the Writing Center.

**better**: Mrs. Whitesell teaches College Writing, but she also directs the Writing Center. *(Two simple sentences combined by but to form a compound sentence)*

**or**: Mrs. Whitesell is not only an English teacher but also is Director of the Writing Center. *(Two predicate nominatives were combined into one compound predicate nominative [underlined] and placed in the same sentence.)*

Subordination: the turning of a related sentence into an appositive phrase or dependent clause. Three major types of modifiers are noted here which will help to vary sentences by allowing the writer to place emphasis on different ideas.

**good**: Brian Miller is a tutor at the Writing Center. He’s a funky guy.

**better**: Brian Miller, a tutor at the Writing Center, is a funky guy. *(The underlined words have been turned into an appositive phrase.)*
or: Brian Miller is a funky guy who tutors at the Writing Center. *(The underlined words are a relative clause, introduced by a relative pronoun; it is similar in effect to using an appositive phrase.)*

or: Because Brian Miller is a tutor at the Writing Center, he’s a funky guy. *(The underlined words are a causal clause, introduced by because. Since or as can also be used; these types of clauses are used to emphasize a cause and effect relationship between two sentences.)*

or: When Brian Miller tutors at the Writing Center, he’s a funky guy. *(The underlined phrase is a temporal clause, indicating a relationship in time between two sentences. Other words which may introduce such a clause are while, during, after, etc.)*

2. Vary Word Order

You can also make sentences interesting by examining the pattern of words within each sentence. Try to rearrange the usual order of noun-verb-modifier to spice things up a bit.

**good:** Steve Goldstein ran reckless and screaming from the tutoring room.

**better:** Reckless and screaming, Steve Goldstein ran from the tutoring room. *(The underlined adjectives have been moved to the front of the sentence to emphasize the manner in which Steve fled the room.)*

3. Vary Diction

Diction is a fancy word (and therefore interesting!) for word choice. Use language that is varied, interesting, vivid, and fresh. In short, avoid writing tired words.

Avoid trite language: i.e., don’t use cliché phrases.

example: In an ideal world, writing tutors who are over the hill would retire before they were past their prime.

**better:** Ideally, aging writing tutors would retire before they lost their grammatical skills. *(The underlined words replace the cliché phrases in the preceding sentence.)*

Use interesting vocabulary, but be careful not to sound strained. A good rule of thumb is that if you’ve already forgotten what the word from the thesaurus means by the time you reread your paper, don’t use it! For example, the words correspondence or composition are fine to replace writing, but the word graphorrhea is a little much. *(And yes it really is a word!)*

Use active verbs: Prefer strong verbs to drab ones; look especially to replace forms of the verb “to be.”

**good:** Professor Jennings is in the English department at F&M.

**better:** Professor Jennings teaches in the English department at F&M. *(In this sentence, the verb does the work and makes the sentence more active.)*
4. **Vary Punctuation**

Varying punctuation patterns can work wonders in a paper. Try straying from the repeated use of periods and semicolons to combine related independent clauses. Try using colons to combine sentences of equivalent meaning, or use dashes to emphasize or subordinate a phrase.

**good:** Shaheen tutors in the evening. However, her club meets every other Thursday after dinner, so she was forced to compromise.

**better:** Shaheen was forced to compromise when her club meetings – every other Thursday evening – conflicted with her work schedule.

**or:** for Shaheen, a compromise was necessary: she could not go to work and attend the meeting at the same time.

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