WRITE ENGLISH GBR

Structuring Sentences – The Basics

Here you can learn

- **the basics of how to write a well-structured sentence.**

This information sheet is linked to Information Sheet 9a: *Structuring sentences - Improving Clarity.* An associated worksheet is also available.

General Information

A good paper contains well-structured sentences. A sentence in English should contain a subject (either stated or implied) and a verb, and it should be a complete thought. The most common sentence structure in English is subject-verb-object. But before we look at sentences, we should first understand the difference between an independent clause and a dependent clause.

An independent clause, also called the main clause, contains a subject, a verb, and often an object or complement. As the name suggests, an independent clause is a complete sentence, conveying a complete thought. It can stand by itself as a simple sentence.
e.g., *Nature is one of the most well-known scientific journals.*

A dependent or subordinate clause, on the other hand, does not convey a complete thought.
e.g., *Although Nature is o*ne *of the best-known scientific journals, ….*

A dependent clause cannot stand on its own as a sentence. It needs an independent clause before or after it, e.g., *Although Nature is one of the best-known scientific journals, it will probably be easier to get your paper published in a lesser-known journal.*

Now, to return to sentences

There are four sentence types: simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences.

Simple Sentences
- A simple sentence contains only one independent clause. Like all sentences, it should have an interesting or new fact for the reader,
     e.g., *The scientific journal Nature was first published in November 1869*.

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Compound Sentences

- A compound sentence contains two or more independent clauses joined by a conjunction, e.g., *for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so,* or *whereas*.
  e.g., *Nature is a weekly peer-reviewed journal, and it is one of the best-known scientific journals in the world*.

Complex Sentences

- A complex sentence contains one independent clause and at least one dependent clause,
  e.g., *Nature, which was first published in England in 1869, is one of the best-known scientific journals in the world.*

Compound-Complex Sentences

- A compound-complex sentence contains at least two main clauses and one dependent clause.
  e.g., *Nature, which was first published in England in 1869, is one of the best-known scientific, but it has a low acceptance rate.*

Which Sentence Types Should You Be Using?

Basically, an academic text needs a mix of all sentence types. Simple sentences are the easiest to understand. Compound sentences are used to join sentences, particularly when one of the independent clauses cannot add anything really new but the information is required; your readers will tend to forget the information in the first independent clause and only remember the second independent clause. Complex sentences allow you to write in more detail. Many sentences in academic English will be complex because readers expect detail. However, if all your sentences are complex, your text will be difficult to read. Compound-complex sentences are the most difficult to understand. You should try to reduce the number of them in your text. In particular, try not to start your text with these sentences; your readers will appreciate an easy start. You can make things more complex later.

Final Comments/Tips

In academic writing, a sentence is often considered too long once it goes over about 25 words.
It makes for more interesting reading if you vary sentence length.

- Break up long sentences. They are difficult to read and write and are more likely to contain grammatical mistakes. Decide about where to break using this guideline: a sentence should contain only one complete thought, not several.

- If you have too many simple sentences, your text could lack the necessary details and thus appear unscientific. If you have too many compound-complex sentences, your text is likely to be difficult to read.

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