Sentence Variation Using Word Choice

One of the most important aspects of an engaging paper is sentence variation, which is the deliberate stylistic differentiation of sentences. One way of achieving that variation is through word choice. Actively varying verb, adjective, and adverb choice can dramatically spice up a paper. For other ways to create sentence variation, see our handouts on “Sentence Variation Using Sentence Length” and “Sentence Types.”

Passive and Active Voice: Verb Variety
Writing in the active voice (versus the passive voice) improves verb variation. The active voice removes forms of to be verbs (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been) and replaces them with active verbs. Compare the two examples below:

The fair contest was won five times in a row by a particular apple pie. It was always chosen as the winner of the Apple Pie competition, but last year it was judged to be the best in all categories. The recipe was begged for by all the judges. The recipe was published in the newspaper because of the pie’s reputation.

The pie won five times at the fair. It always wins the Apple Pie competition, but last year it earned best in all categories. It tasted so good that all the judges begged for the recipe. The newspaper published the recipe because of the pie’s reputation.

Not only does the first example lack clarity, it also lacks variety. By changing the verbs from passive to active, the paragraph makes more sense and has a more compelling style. For more information on passive voice and when to avoid using it, see our "Passive Voice" handout.

Repetition of Verbs
In order to achieve variety, a writer should avoid reusing the same verbs in a paragraph. Compare the two paragraphs below, both written in the active voice.

“This pie is amazing,” said the county fair judge. Sarah, the pie maker, said, “I know! It is an apple pie from my grandma’s recipe.” The ingredients are simple, but the secret to Sarah’s family’s pie is chilled apples. “Chilling the apples? That is genius!” said a fellow pie maker. “Grandma Foster is a genius!” said Sarah.

“This pie is amazing,” gushed the county fair judge. Sarah acknowledged that her grandma created the pie and its recipe. The recipe calls for simple ingredients, but the secret lies in chilling the apples. “Chilling the apples? That’s genius!” exclaimed a fellow pie maker. “Grandma Foster is a genius!” replied Sarah.

The first paragraph overuses a few flat verbs. The second paragraph conveys the same message, but shows more variety. By using varied and more descriptive verbs, a writer can make a paragraph much more rich, clear, and engaging.
Adjective and Adverb Variety

A writer can use adjectives and adverbs in a sentence to add emphasis or create variety. Sentences without adjectives and adverbs often sound more technical; they lack personality. The paragraph below uses no adverbs or adjectives.

A baker uses apples to bake his pies. He decorates them with fruits or crust. The crusts can even have designs on them.

On the other hand, too many adjectives or adverbs can severely affect the clarity of a sentence. Go through the paragraph below and underline every adverb and adjective to better see this example.

A baker uses green or red apples to lovingly bake delicious pies. He intricately decorates them with tasty fruits or crispy crust. Crusts can have painstakingly delicate, traditional designs or whimsical, inventive designs.

After underlining, you end up with more marked words than unmarked words; when there are too many adverbs and adjectives, a paragraph loses its main idea. A good strategy to follow is to use fewer adverbs and adjectives in explanatory or idea-advancing sentences than in descriptive sentences. Examine the following example:

A baker uses apples to bake his pies. He intricately decorates them with fruits or crust. Crusts can have traditional or inventive designs on them. The baker chooses either a traditional design with a crisscross pattern of sugary crust or an inventive design with whimsical sugar creations or outrageous colors.

Notice that the beginning of the paragraph, which consists of mostly idea-advancing sentences, has few adjectives and adverbs. The paragraph advances with more descriptive words. You can use adverbs and adjectives with a careful eye to achieve incredible variety in writing and showcase style in word choice. Be sure not to add too many adverbs and adjectives if you feel that there are not enough; over-saturation of descriptors obscures the meaning of your writing.

Deliberate and varied word choice creates a more exciting and engaging paper. Try it in your own writing!

Contact
Want to talk about how to enhance your sentence variation? Come work with a tutor at the Writing Center! Drop by or use the information below to contact us and set up an appointment.

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