

# How to Improve Your Prose: Building a Sentence

## Syntactics (Syntax + Tactics)

**O**ne of the choices writers must make is which of two rhetorical types of sentences to use: the periodic or the cumulative. Consider these two versions of the same sentence from Annie Dillard's "Living Like Weasels":

*Curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses, I could live two days in the den.*

*I could live two days in the den, curled, leaning on mouse fur, sniffing bird bones, blinking, licking, breathing musk, my hair tangled in the roots of grasses.*

We call the first version a periodic sentence because it postpones the main idea (expressed in the main clause, "I could live . . .") until the very end (the period) of the sentence. The modifying details come first and hold the sentence in suspended animation until the main clause completes the thought. The second version is a cumulative sentence; it presents the main clause first, then explains, amplifies, and illustrates it with descriptive details that conclude the sentence.

In "Living Like Weasels," Annie Dillard makes artistic use of the cumulative sentence, which effectively reveals her thought processes of observation and reflection. In these cases, she uses a variety of structures to attach descriptive details to the main clause that begins the sentence. For example, note the way she elaborates her comparison of the weasel with a human being:

*The weasel lives in necessity and we live in choice, hating necessity and dying at the last in its talons.*

In this cumulative sentence, the writer begins with the main clause. Then she develops the idea expressed there by using a participial phrase ("hating necessity"). Elsewhere, Dillard utilizes a similar structure, the absolute phrase, to sharpen the description of the sleeping weasel:

*He sleeps in his underground den, his tail draped over his nose.*

With the participial phrase, the participles ("hating" and "dying") modify "we," which lies outside the phrase. With the absolute phrase, the participle ("draped") modifies "tail," which is part of the phrase. Still, in both cases, we can feel the author's thought unfolding as we read the details that she attaches to the main clause.

## Prepositional Phrases & Dependent Clauses

In another cumulative sentence, Dillard uses a prepositional phrase to characterize the look she and the weasel exchange when they confront each other at Hollins Pond:

*It was also a bright blow to the brain, or a sudden beating of brains, with all the charge and intimate grace of rubbed balloons.*

Here she uses the preposition *with* to attach her sensory depiction of the exchange with the weasel to the main clause. Similarly, when the writer reflects on the possibility of living like the weasel, she uses a dependent clause to show us exactly why she admires the animal's muteness:

*I remember muteness as a prolonged and giddy fast, where every moment is a feast of utterance received.*

Sometimes Dillard finishes off her sentences by using a colon to introduce a general, summarizing expression to wrap up a series of images, as we see in her depiction of the record the weasel leaves behind:

*His journal is tracks in clay, a spray of feathers, mouse blood, and bone: uncollected, unconnected, loose-leaf, and blown.*

## Exercise: Cumulative Sentences

On a separate sheet of paper, combine each of these clusters of short sentences into one cumulative sentence. Put the main clause first, and then use the structures recommended to attach the descriptive details.

1. Charles rushed out of the concert. His ears were ringing. His clothes reeked of smoke. [*two absolute phrases*]
2. O'Hara urged his teammates on. His voice was faint. He clapped his hands rhythmically. [*two prepositional phrases*]
3. My family can't wait to get to the beach. That is where we begin to relax. That is where we collect ourselves. This is where we prepare to return to real life. [*three dependent clauses*]
4. The sleet made its presence felt on the car. It drummed on the roof. It pelted the windows. It made the passengers flinch. [*three participial phrases*]
5. Bill looked at his grade report, which reflected numerous absences, incomplete assignments, and failed tests—all with the appropriate negative symbols. These results were deserved. They were warranted. They were just. [*colon with a general, summarizing expression*]