

# How to Improve Your Prose

## The Long & Short of Sentences

### Syntactics (Syntax + Tactics)

Since writing reflects the flow of a character's feelings and thoughts, writers can achieve specific emotional effects by varying the lengths of their sentences. In "The Raffle," V.S. Naipaul depicts the narrator's fear of Mr. Hinds by using a succession of short, abrupt sentences:

*On the shelf below The Last of England, he kept four or five tamarind rods. They are good for beating. They are limber, they sting, and they last.*

The brevity of the sentences and the repetition of "they" heighten the sense of drama surrounding the tamarind rods. If Naipaul had expressed these ideas in one long sentence, the passage might have read as follows: "On the shelf below *The Last of England*, he kept four or five tamarind rods, which are good for beating because they are limber, durable and able to sting." But note how much less effective this version is. The longer sentence dissipates the energy of the language and its emotional content.

In his description of Mr. Hinds's private lessons, Naipaul again uses short sentences to convey the students' anxieties:

*We knew he gave those "private lessons" because he needed the extra money. He gave us private lessons in the ten-minute morning recess. Every boy paid fifty cents for that.*

If the author had used one long, smooth sentence to depict Mr. Hinds's ritual of extortion, he would have sacrificed much of the drama created by the choppy, short sentences.

Just as V.S. Naipaul uses short sentences to create a sense of anxiety in a Trinidadian schoolboy, Dylan Thomas uses long sentences to portray the slow

awakening of a Welsh seacoast town in his story "Quite Early One Morning." Note how languorous and lyrical is the sentence that opens the story:

*Quite early one morning in the winter in Wales, by the sea that was lying down still and green as grass after a night of tar-black howling and rolling, I went out of the house, where I had come to stay for a cold unseasonable holiday, to see if it was raining still, if the outhouse had been blown away, potatoes, shears, rat-killer, shrimp-nets, and tins of rusty nails aloft on the wind, and if all the cliffs were left.*

With this expansive sentence, Thomas creates a feeling of range and sweep as the narrator reflects on both the ferocity of the nightmare storm and the calm of the morning after. If Thomas had chosen to separate the images into short sentences, the passage might have read something like this: "I went out of the house. I had come there to stay for a cold, unseasonable holiday. I wanted to see if it was raining still." But this version loses the almost epic feeling of the storm and its aftermath.

As the narrator proceeds on his journey, Thomas uses another long sentence, this time to express the alertness of the speaker and the fullness of his vision:

*The town was not yet awake, and I walked through the streets like a stranger come out of the sea, shrugging off weed and wave and darkness with each step, or like an inquisitive shadow, determined to miss nothing — not the preliminary tremor in the throat of the dawn-saving cock or the first winnowing nudge of arranged time in the belly of the alarm clock on the trunked chest of drawers under the knitted text and the done-by-hand water-colors of Porthcanni or Trinidad.*

Here, the sentence echoes the stranger's determination to miss nothing. Again,

his vision is expansive, embracing, and the sentence reflects that feeling.

Both Naipaul and Thomas are masterful writers, each of whom set out to describe distinct states of feeling—one constricted, and anxious, the other sweeping, and passionate. For each story, the choices of using longer or shorter sentences carry great weight.

**Exercise A:** On a separate piece of paper, combine each of the following sets of sentences into one long sentence:

1. Bob was determined to make the best of his last interview. He checked his watch. He double-checked the contents of his briefcase. He took one last look in the hall mirror. Then he strode confidently into Billings's office.

2. Alex despised his job. He despised the long hours. He despised the low pay. He despised his obtruse managers. He resolved to make this day in his job his last. He resolved to begin his job-search anew.

**Exercise B:** On a separate piece of paper, divide each of the following long sentences into several short ones:

1. Looking down Dune Drive, we saw joggers and bikers taking advantage of the dependable sun, families with coolers and blankets scurrying to the water's edge, sidewalk vendors hawking ice cream and other goodies, and we knew that we had made the right decision about our summer vacation.

2. Although Mr. Malcolm emphasized Bill's positive attributes—his involvement in class activities, his solid reputation, his willing attitude—he knew that Bill's chances of being admitted to the university were slim, so he ended his letter with a strong emotional appeal.

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