Sentence Structure as a Rhetorical Strategy

BASIC SENTENCE TYPES

**Fragment:** The fragment is close to conversation. It is the laconic reply, the pointed afterthought, the quiet exclamation, the telling question.

Ex: *But no more.*
   *First, a look behind the scenes.*
   *Again: the man of reason.*

**Simple:** (One clause plus modifiers). A great many brief, simple sentences make the essay seem naive. However, simple sentences used before or after longer sentences create emphasis. Several short sentences may also create tension.

The best short sentences are the meatiest:
   *To be awake is to be alive.*
   *A stitch in time saves nine.*
   *The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.*

**Compound:** (Two or more independent clauses joined by coordinating conjunctions, colon or semi-colon). Sheridan Baker explains, "The compound sentence coordinates, treating everything on the same level, linking ideas one after the other. The compound sentence is essentially simple-minded, but this way of thinking is often necessary. It is always useful simply for pacing off related thoughts, and for breaking the staccato of simple statement. It often briskly connects cause and effect. Since the compound sentence is built on the most enduring of colloquial patterns--the simple sequence of things said as they occur to the mind--it has the pace, the immediacy, and the dramatic effect of talk. Hemingway, for instance, often gets all the numb tension of a shell-shocked mind by reducing his character's thoughts all to one level, in sentences something like this: "It was a good night and I sat at a table, and ... and ...." With but, and, & or, the compound sentence becomes more thoughtful; with semicolon and colon, it becomes more sophisticated still.

Ex: *I came, I saw, I conquered.* (for very short, you may use commas)*
   *Economic theorists assume a common man: he commonly wants more than he can supply.*
   *Art is long, but life is short.*

**Complex:** (one independent clause with one or more subordinate clause). Complex sentences characterize more complicated writings, writings which show logical relations, qualifications or subordination of ideas. Subordinations of the complex usually require more thought; an abundance of complex sentences creates a scholarly, weighty tone. The practiced writer avoids faulty subordination by subordinating less important ideas to more important ones.

Subtle subordinations involve the relative pronouns that, which, & who:
   *The car, which runs perfectly, is not worth selling.*
   *The car that runs perfectly is worth keeping.*
More powerful subordination arises from subordinating conjunctions—although, if, because, since, until, where, when, since, as if, so that…:

*Next morning when the first light came into the sky and the sparrows stirred in the trees, when the cows rattled their chains and the rooster crowed and the early automobiles went whispering along the road, Wilbur awoke and looked for Charlotte.*

**Cumulative** These sentences consist of base clauses plus modification which consist of various phrase or clausal structures. The accumulation of details, modifiers or images create a dense, rich texture.

*A moment later she was swimming back to the side of the pool, her head of short-clipped auburn hair held up, straight ahead of her, as though it were a rose on a long stem.*

(Verb phrases/cluster): *A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea.*

**ARRANGING SENTENCES BY STRUCTURE:**

**Parallelism** is the repetition of like grammatical structures for the sake of coherence or emphasis. When the parallel elements are similar in rhythm as well as structure, the result is balance. When the parallel elements contrast with one another, the result is antithesis. When several parallel elements are coordinate and arranged in order of descending or ascending importance (climax) the result is gradation. In expository writing, parallelism clarifies the author's meaning; in other types of writing, parallelism is often used to intensify the reader's emotional response.

- I went to the store, found the salesman, and returned the radio.
- Communist China should not be considered a great power. Her agriculture is insufficient to support her population. Her industrial production is still low compared to other countries. Her army lacks transport . . .

**Balance:**
- Einstein pondered his equations, and Hitler pondered the philosophy of Mein Kampf.

**Antithesis:**
- Place your virtues on a pedestal; put your vices under a rock.
- One small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.

**Gradation** (3 phrases/clauses are called a tricolon):
- Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.
- He willed his money to his children, his home to his wife, his manuscripts to the university and his genius to the American people.
How **sentence structure** may be a **rhetorical strategy**.

| Dave Brubeck: “Rhythm is an international language—not melody, not harmony. Maybe it’s the heartbeat . . .”  
| (from *Dave Brubeck: In His Own Sweet Way*, documentary produced by Clint Eastwood) |

1. **Syntactical Variation:** short sentences contrast with longer sentences; the meaning in the short sentence is emphasized.

Granted, the 3 percent figure is self-reported and Politifact, the non-partisan, Pulitzer Prize-winning fact-checking website, suggests it could nudge higher depending on how you crunch the numbers. But it also rules that Sen. Jon Kyl "vastly overstated" the organization's involvement in abortions. In other words, he lied. (Leonard Pitts)

2. **Repetition/Refrain:** purposeful repetition of important words

“When it comes to health care reforms to give families more access and more choices, results matter. When it comes to improving our economy and creating new jobs, results matter. When it comes to better securing our homeland and fighting the forces of terror, results matter. And when it comes to choosing a President, results matter.” (George Bush)

3. **Parallelism:** repetition of similar syntactical patterns

Barack Obama:

“It's the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs;  
the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores;  
the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta;  
the hope of a millworker's son who dares to defy the odds;  
the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too.”  
(Pattern is noun--prepositional phrase--participial phrase)

4. **Balanced Parallel Phrases**

Al Gore:

“I want to say to all Americans this evening that  
whether it is the threat to the global environment or  
the erosion of America's leadership in the world,  
whether it is the challenge to our economy from new competitors or  
the challenge to our security from new enemies,  
I believe that we need new leadership that is both strong and wise.”

Sources: Sheridan Baker *The Complete Stylist*  
O. B. Hardison, Jr. *Practical Rhetoric*