

Variety in Sentence Structure: Loose Sentence, Periodic Sentence, and the Combination Sentence

AP English Tutorial

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Two sentence patterns are of major importance:

- The **Loose** Sentence
- The **Periodic** Sentence

Every sentence in the English language will fit into one of these categories or will be a combination of both. Once you understand the two patterns, you can write any kind of sentence you like without the slightest fear of going astray.

You can master these patterns easily if you first get a grip on one important principle: The principle of the basic statement (main idea).

The following are basic statements:

- 1. Bells rang.**
- 2. Love is blind.**
- 3. The cat scratched Sally.**
- 4. John gave his mother flowers.**
- 5. The teacher considered him a good student.**

Every English sentence contains a basic statement. It may stand alone as one short sentence as in the examples above, or it may be buried inside a longer sentence. It is the kernel that you have left after you chop away everything in a sentence except its essential meaning; it is the kernel you build on when you want to make a sentence longer.

THE LOOSE SENTENCE is a basic statement with a string of details added to it.

Basic statement: Bells rang.

Loose sentence: Bells rang, filling the air with their clangor, startling pigeons into flight from every belfry, bringing people into the streets to hear the news.

Basic statement: The teacher considered him a good student.

Loose sentence: **The teacher considered him a good student**, steady if not inspired, willing if not eager, responsive to instruction and conscientious about his

"A **loose sentence** makes its major point at the beginning and then adds subordinate phrases and clauses that develop or modify the point.

Example of loose sentence:

I am willing to pay slightly higher taxes for the privilege of living in Canada, considering the free health care, the cheap tuition fees, the low crime rate, the comprehensive social programs, and the wonderful winters.

The main point of this sentence is that the writer prefers to live in Canada, and the writer makes the point at the very beginning: everything which follows is simply extra information. When the readers read about the free health care, the cheap tuition fees, the low crime rate, the comprehensive social programs, and the wonderful winters, they will already know that these are reasons for living in Canada, and as a result, they will be more likely to understand the sentence on a first reading.

Loose sentences are the most natural for English speakers, who almost always talk in loose sentences: even the most sophisticated English writers tend to use loose sentences much more often than periodic sentences. While a periodic sentence can be useful for making an important point or for a special dramatic effect, it is also much more difficult to read, and often requires readers to go back and reread the sentence once they understand the main point.

THE PERIODIC SENTENCE: In this sentence, additional details are placed before the basic statement. Delay, of course, is the secret weapon of the periodic sentence.

Basic statement: **John gave his mother flowers.**

Periodic sentence: **John**, the tough one, the sullen kid who scoffed at any show of sentiment, **gave his mother flowers.**

Basic statement: **The cat scratched Sally.**

Periodic sentence: Suddenly, for no apparent reason, **the loveable cat scratched Sally**

Example of the periodic sentence:

Considering the free health care, the cheap tuition fees, the low crime rate, the comprehensive social programs, and the wonderful winters, **I am willing to pay slightly higher taxes for the privilege of living in Canada.**

The main point of this sentence is that the writer prefers to live in Canada. At the beginning of this sentence, the reader does not know what point the writer is going to make: what about the free health care, cheap tuition fees, low crime rate, comprehensive social programs, and wonderful winters? The reader has to read all of this information *without* knowing what the conclusion will be.

The periodic sentence has become much rarer in formal English writing over the past hundred years, and it has never been common in informal spoken English (outside of bad political speeches). Still, it is a powerful rhetorical tool. An occasional periodic sentence is not only dramatic but persuasive: even if the readers do not agree with your conclusion, they will read your evidence first with open minds. If you use a loose sentence with hostile readers, the readers will probably close their minds before considering any of your evidence.

THE PERIODIC INTERRUPTIVE: In this sentence, additional details are added inside the basic statement:

Basic statement: Love is blind.

Periodic sentence: Love, as everyone knows except those who happen to be afflicted with it, **is blind.**

THE COMBINATION: In this sentence, additional details are added before and after the basic statement, making the sentence both a combination of the loose sentence and the periodic sentence.

Once you have learned to recognize and use the two major sentence patterns, you can forget about adhering to them strictly. You can combine elements of both if you wish.

Suppose you are working with a short, simple sentence--A sentence reduced to the barest basic statement:

John was angry.

This short sentence may sound exactly right inside your paragraph--just short enough and sharp enough to have the force you want. In that case, leave it alone. But perhaps that nagging inner ear tells you that it isn't quite right; it needs something. Thus, you make it a shade more **periodic**:

John was suddenly, violently **angry**.

Or you make it even more **periodic**:

John, usually the calmest of men, **was** suddenly, violently **angry**.

Or you decide to add detail at the end:

John, usually the calmest of men, **was** suddenly, violently **angry**, so angry that he lost control completely.

Now the sentence is both **periodic** and **loose**. You could shake it up still more by moving some of the detail up front:

Usually the calmest of men, **John was** suddenly, violently **angry**, so angry that he lost control completely.

EXPANDING THE SUBJECT, VERB, AND OBJECT

Periodic structures usually expand the subject or verb. **Loose** structures expand the verb or object.

Expanding the Subject:

The easiest way to start the details flowing is to think of the subject as being followed by a pause. Make yourself hear that pause. It is exactly the same kind of pause that occurs in your own conversation every day, in **sentences** like the following. (Notice these **sentences** are **periodic** interruptive and they expand the subjects.)

That boy, the one wearing glasses, **is in my history class**.

This piecrust, tough as it is, **tastes pretty good**.

Here's another example: **The class** (pause) **read the assignment**.

The class, a mixture of juniors and seniors in advanced math, **read the assignment**.

The class, usually noisy and inattentive, **read the assignment**.

The class, with a subdued rustle of books and papers, **read the assignment**.

When expanding the subject, consider these methods of expansion: description, appositive, adjective, prepositional phrase, participles, etc.

Expanding the Verb: (Notice that these sentences are periodic interruptive.)

Expand the verb by showing how its action progresses. Any phrase that tells how or when a verb acts is related grammatically to the verb.

The class read, listlessly at first, and then with growing interest, **the assignment**.

The class read, after trying unsuccessfully to divert the instructor, **the assignment**.

Expanding the Object (or the rest of the sentence): Notice that these sentences are loose.

The class read the assignment, a full chapter.

I saw Mr. Hassenfeffer, the instructor.

The class read the assignment, a full chapter, with a dismaying number of difficult-looking statistical tables.

I saw Mr. Hassenfeffer, the instructor, flat-nosed, beady-eyes, on guard every minute.