

Vary? Very Important!

Some things were not destined for variety. If some hours ran sixty minutes while others ran forty-seven and a half minutes, our days would be difficult to organize. Writing, though, is one thing that needs variety, especially when it comes to sentence length. Too many sentences of the same length create a monotonous rhythm that puts readers to sleep. By contrast, sentences that vary in length make reading more pleasant and ideas more distinct. In this lesson, you will practice varying sentence length in order to keep your writing interesting.

Sharing an Example: Into Thin Air

Let's track the fluency in this passage by Jon Krakauer, from his nonfiction book about the tragic events of the 1996 climb on Mount Everest. Read it once just to get a feel for the ideas and rhythm. Carefully read it again, this time noticing sentence lengths.

It was early in the afternoon of May 10, 1996. I hadn't slept in fifty-seven hours. The only food I'd been able to force down over the preceding three days was a bowl of ramen soup and a handful of peanut M&Ms. Weeks of violent coughing had

left me with two separated ribs that made ordinary breathing an excruciating trial. At 29,028 feet up in the troposphere, so little oxygen was reaching my brain that my mental capacity was that of a slow child. Under the circumstances, I was incapable of feeling much of anything except cold and tired.

Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mount Everest Disaster* (New York: Villard Books, 1997), p. 6.

Your Response

What did you think about the fluency of this passage? If you're not sure, try reading the passage aloud.

___ Not very fluent—there's no variety in sentence length at all!

___ Fluency is OK —there's some variety, but most sentences are the same length.

___ Very smooth and fluent—there's good variety in sentence length!

What Do the Numbers Say?

If you look very closely, you can see that no two sentences in this passage are the same length. Maybe you also noticed how the variety gave the writing an interesting rhythm and flow. If you rated this passage high in fluency, you'll see that the numbers support your impression:

Number of sentences in passage: 6

Number of words in each sentence: 10, 6, 26, 18, 24, 15

To emphasize the variety, read the numbers aloud as if they are words. In this passage, the topic sentence appears last. Topic sentences need to be clear and crisp—medium to short in length. The first sentence provides the time frame, while the others supply the details of the writer's physical condition in sentences varying from 6 to 26 words. By the time we read the last sentence, we have a vivid picture of a climber in trouble. A clear main idea, strong word choice, and sentences of varying lengths all work together to keep our attention.

Your Turn

Read the next sample of writing aloud to yourself. As you read, ask yourself, *How does sentence length affect fluency? How does the passage sound and feel?*

TV Time

I think I could be a neglected child. We have only one TV in our house. Our TV is in the family room. It isn't even a big screen set. I don't have a TV in my room. My friends all have TVs in their rooms. My parents think TV time should be family time. They don't have one in their room either. It's like we live back in the 1950s. Back then, TV was new. TV sets were very expensive to buy. Technology is very different now in 2002. I'd like one more TV just for me. That way I could watch things I like. My parents love to watch cooking shows. Anything is better than the food channel.

You Do the Math

Before you do your final rating, do the math. First count the number of sentences and then count the number of words in each sentence.

Number of sentences _____

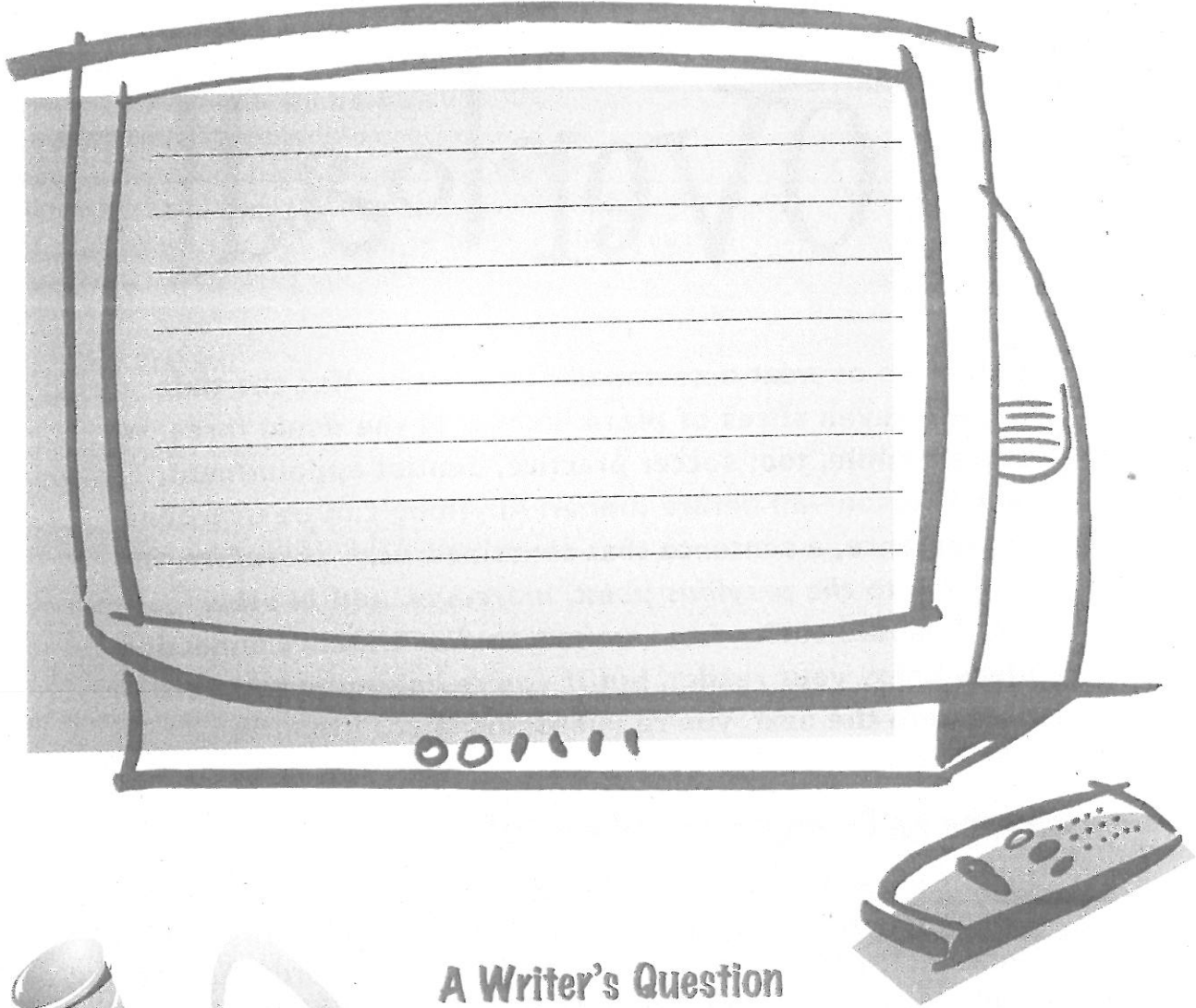
Number of words in each sentence: _____

What do these numbers tell you? Now, think about revision strategies, such as sentence combining, that you have practiced in other exercises or in your own writing. List two revision strategies you could use to improve sentence fluency in this sample.

1. _____
2. _____

Putting the Strategies to Work

Read the piece about TV once more, keeping in mind that your revision goal is to vary the sentence lengths to improve fluency. Mark the original passage first, thinking through your revision. Then, write your revision here:



A Writer's Question

In this lesson, you revised for sentence fluency, making a paragraph easier and more interesting to read. By doing this, did you also strengthen other traits—ideas, organization, voice, or word choice? Read both the original and your revision again before you answer.