

TOOL 7



Fear not the long sentence.

*Take the reader on a journey
of language and meaning.*

Everyone fears the long sentence. Editors fear it. Readers fear it. Most of all, writers fear it. Even I fear it. Look. Another short one. Shorter. Fragments. Frags. Just letters. F . . . f . . . f . . . f. Can I write a sentence without words? Just punctuation? . . . #:!?

Write what you fear. Until the writer tries to master the long sentence, she is no writer at all, for while length makes a bad sentence worse, it can make a good sentence better.

My favorite Tom Wolfe essay from the early days of the New Journalism movement is "A Sunday Kind of Love," named after a romantic ballad of the period. The events described take place one morning in a New York subway station on a Thursday, not a Sunday. Wolfe sees and seizes a moment of youthful passion on the city underground to redefine urban romance.

Love! Attar of libido in the air! It is 8:45 A.M. Thursday morning in the IRT subway station at 50th Street and Broadway and already two kids are hung up in a kind of herringbone weave of arms and legs, which proves, one has to admit, that love is not confined to Sunday in New York.

That's a fine beginning. Erotic fragments and exclamation points. The concave/convex connection of love captured in "herringbone weave," the quick movement from short sentence to long, as writer and reader dive from the top of the ladder of abstraction, from love and libido, down to two kids making out, back up to variations on amour in the metropolis.

During rush hour, subway travelers learn the meaning of *length*: the length of the platform, the length of the wait, the length of the train, the length of the escalators and stairwells to ground level, the length of lines of hurried, grouchy, impatient commuters. Notice how Wolfe uses the length of his sentences to reflect that reality:

Still the odds! All the faces come popping in clots out of the Seventh Avenue local, past the King Size Ice Cream machine, and the turnstiles start whacking away as if the world were breaking up on the reefs. Four steps past the turnstiles everybody is already backed up haunch to paunch for the climb up the ramp and the stairs to the surface, a great funnel of flesh, wool, felt, leather, rubber and steaming alumicon, with the blood squeezing through everybody's old sclerotic arteries in hopped-up spurts from too much coffee and the effort of surfacing from the subway at the rush hour. Yet there on the landing are a boy and a girl, both about eighteen, in one of those utter, My Sin, backbreaking embraces.

This is classic Wolfe, a world where "sclerotic" serves as antonym for *erotic*, where exclamation points sprout like wildflowers, where experience and status are defined by brand names. ("My Sin" was a perfume of the day.) But wait! There's more! As the couple canoodles, a cavalcade of commuters passes by:

All round them, ten, scores, it seems like hundreds, of faces and bodies are perspiring, trooping and bellying up the stairs with arterio-sclerotic grimaces past a showcase full of such novel items

as Joy Buzzers, Squirting Nickels, Finger Rats, Scary Tarantulas and spoons with realistic dead flies on them, past Fred's barber-shop, which is just off the landing and has glossy photographs of young men with the kind of baroque haircuts one can get in there, and up onto 50th Street into a madhouse of traffic and shops with weird lingerie and gray hair-dyeing displays in the windows, signs for free teacup readings and a pool-playing match between the Playboy Bunnies and Downey's Showgirls, and then everybody pounds on toward the Time-Life Building, the Brill Building or NBC.

Has any reader ever experienced a more glorious long sentence, a more rollicking evocation of underground New York, a more dazzling 128 words from capital letter to period? If you find one, I'd like to read it.

A close reading of Wolfe suggests some strategies to achieve mastery of the long sentence:

- It helps if subject and verb of the main clause come early in the sentence.
- Use the long sentence to describe something long. Let form follow function.
- It helps if the long sentence is written in chronological order.
- Use the long sentence in variation with sentences of short and medium length.
- Use the long sentence as a list or catalog of products, names, images.
- Long sentences need more editing than short ones. Make every word count. Even. In. A. Very. Long. Sentence.

Writing long sentences means going against the grain. But isn't that what the best writers do? In his novel *The Rings of Saturn*, W. G. Sebald uses the long sentence to explain — and mirror — the antique prose style of English essayist Sir Thomas Browne:

In common with other English writers of the seventeenth century, Browne wrote out of the fullness of his erudition, deploying a vast repertoire of quotations and the names of authorities who had gone before, creating complex metaphors and analogies, and constructing labyrinthine sentences that sometimes extend over one or two pages, sentences that resemble processions or a funeral cortege in their sheer ceremonial lavishness. It is true that, because of the immense weight of the impediments he is carrying, Browne's writing can be held back by the force of gravitation, but when he does succeed in rising higher and higher through the circles of his spiralling prose, borne aloft like a glider on warm currents of air, even today the reader is overcome by a sense of levitation.

In the 1940s Rudolf Flesch described the effects that made a sentence "easy" or "hard" to read. According to Flesch, an 1893 study illuminated the shrinking English sentence: "The average Elizabethan written sentence ran to about 45 words; the Victorian sentence to 29; ours to 20 and less." Flesch used sentence length and syllable count as factors in his readability studies, an arithmetic once derided by E. B. White in his essay "Calculating Machine." "Writing is an act of faith," wrote White, "not a trick of grammar."

The good writer must believe that a good sentence, short or long, will not be lost on the reader. And although Flesch preached the value of the good eighteen-word sentence, he praised long sentences written by such masters as Joseph Conrad. So even for old Rudolf, a long sentence, well crafted, was not a sin against the Flesch.

WORKSHOP

1. Keep an eye out for well-crafted long sentences. Test them in context, using the criteria above.
2. During revision, most journalists take a longish sentence and break it up for clarity. But writers also learn to combine sen-

tences for good effect. Review examples of your recent work. Combine shorter sentences for a richer variety of sentence structures and lengths.

3. Here's a passage from the novel *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* by Jean-Dominique Bauby:

I am fading away. Slowly but surely. Like the sailor who watches the home shore gradually disappear, I watch my past recede. My old life still burns within me, but more and more of it is reduced to the ashes of memory.

Revise this excerpt into a single sentence.

4. The best long sentences flow from good research and reporting. Review Wolfe's sentences above. Notice the details that come from direct observation and note taking. The next time you report in the field, look for scenes and settings that lend themselves to description in a long sentence.

5. Sentences can be divided into four structural categories: simple (one clause); complex (main clause plus dependent clauses); compound (more than one main clause); compound-complex. But a long sentence does not have to be compound or complex. It can be simple:

A tornado ripped through St. Petersburg Friday, tearing roofs off dozens of houses, shattering glass windows of downtown businesses, uprooting palm trees near bayside parks, and leaving Clyde Howard cowering in his claw-footed bathtub.

That thirty-four-word sentence is a simple sentence with one main clause ("A tornado ripped"). In this case the *-ings* help. Survey the contents of your purse, your wallet, or a favorite junk drawer. Write a long simple sentence to describe what's inside.

TOOL 8



Establish a pattern, then give it a twist.

*Build parallel constructions,
but cut across the grain.*

Writers shape up their prose by building parallel structures in their words, phrases, and sentences. "If two or more ideas are parallel," writes Diana Hacker in *A Writer's Reference*, "they are easier to grasp when expressed in parallel grammatical form. Single words should be balanced with single words, phrases with phrases, clauses with clauses."

The effect is most obvious in the words of great orators, such as Martin Luther King Jr. (the emphasis is mine):

So let freedom ring from the *prodigious hilltops* of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the *mighty mountains* of New York. Let freedom ring from the *heightening Alleghenies* of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the *snowcapped Rockies* of Colorado.

Notice how King builds a crescendo from the repetition of words and grammatical structures, in this case a series of prepositional phrases with a noun designating mountains and an adjective defining majesty.

"Use parallels wherever you can," wrote Sheridan Baker in *The Practical Stylist*, "equivalent thoughts demand parallel constructions." Just after reading Baker, I stumbled on an essay by

one of my favorite English authors, G. K. Chesterton, who wrote detective stories, books on religion, and literary essays early in the twentieth century. His more mannered style highlights the parallel structures in his sentences: "With *my* stick and *my* knife, *my* chinks and *my* brown paper, I went out on to the great downs." That sentence strides across the page on the legs of two parallel constructions: the fourfold repetition of "my," and the pair of pairs connected by "and."

The late Neil Postman argued that the problems of society could not be solved by information alone. He shaped his arguments around a set of parallel propositions:

If there are people starving in the world — and there are — it is not caused by insufficient information. If crime is rampant in the streets, it is not caused by insufficient information. If children are abused and wives are battered, that has nothing to do with insufficient information. If our schools are not working and democratic principles are losing their force, that too has nothing to do with insufficient information. If we are plagued by such problems, it is because something else is missing.

By repeating those conditional "If" clauses and ending four consecutive sentences with "insufficient information," Postman sounds a drumbeat of language, a drumline of persuasion.

Suddenly I began to see parallels everywhere. Here is a passage from *The Plot Against America*, a novel by Philip Roth. In one of his trademark long sentences, Roth describes Jewish American working-class life in the 1940s:

The men worked *fifty, sixty, even seventy* or more hours a week; the women worked all the time, with little assistance from labor-saving devices, *washing laundry*, ironing shirts, mending socks, turning collars, sewing on buttons, mothproofing woolens, polishing furniture, sweeping and washing floors, washing windows, *cleaning sinks, tubs, toilets, and stoves*, vacuuming rugs, nursing the sick, shopping for food, cooking meals, feeding relatives, tidy-

ing closets and drawers, overseeing paint jobs and household repairs, arranging for religious observances, paying bills and keeping the family's books while simultaneously attending to their children's health, clothing, cleanliness, schooling, nutrition, conduct, birthdays, discipline, and morale.

In this dazzling inventory of work, I count nineteen parallel phrases, all building on "washing laundry." (And look at all those *-ings*.) But here's Roth's secret: what makes the passage sing is the occasional variation of the pattern, such as the phrase "cleaning sinks, tubs, toilets, and stoves." Roth could have written, "The men worked fifty, sixty, seventy hours a week," a perfectly parallel string of adjectives. Instead, he gives us "even seventy or more." By breaking the pattern, he lends more emphasis to the final element.

A pure parallel construction would be "Boom, boom, boom." Parallelism with a twist gives us "Boom, boom, bang." A pattern with variation created these now familiar phrases and titles:

Hither, thither, and yon
Wynken, Blynken, and Nod
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost
Peter, Paul, and Mary
Sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll

Superman, we all remember, stands not for truth, justice, and patriotism, but "truth, justice, and the American way," two parallel nouns with a twist.

Such intentional violation of parallelism adds power to the conclusion of King's speech:

Let freedom ring from the *curvaceous peaks* of California! [That follows the pattern.] But not only that; let freedom ring from *Stone Mountain* of Georgia!

Let freedom ring from *Lookout Mountain* of Tennessee! Let freedom ring from *every hill and molehill* of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

When King points the compass of freedom toward the segregationist South, he alters the pattern. Generalized American topography is replaced by specific locations associated with racial injustice: Stone Mountain and Lookout Mountain. The final variation covers not just mighty mountains, but every bump of Mississippi.

All writers fail, on occasion, to take advantage of parallel structures. The result for the reader can be the equivalent of driving over a pothole on a freeway. What if Saint Paul taught us that the three great virtues were faith, hope, and committing ourselves to charitable work? What if Abraham Lincoln had written about a government of the people, by the people, and for the entire nation, including the red and blue states? These violations of parallelism should remind us of the exquisite balance of the original versions.

WORKSHOP

1. Examine your recent work with parallelism in mind. Look for examples in which you used parallel structures. Can you find potholes — some unparallel phrases or sentences — that jar the reader?

2. Notice parallel language in novels, in creative nonfiction, in journalism. When you find a passage, underline the parallel structures with a pencil. Discuss the effects of parallelism on the reader.

3. Just for fun, take parallel slogans or sayings and rewrite the last element. For example, John, Paul, George, and that drummer who wears the rings.

4. By fiddling with parallel structures, you might discover that an occasional violation of parallelism — a twist at the end — can lend a humorous imbalance to a sentence. Give it a try.

TOOL 9



Let punctuation control pace and space.

*Learn the rules, but realize
you have more options than you think.*

Some teach punctuation using technical distinctions, such as the difference between restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses. Not here. I prefer tools, not rules. My preference shows no disrespect for the rules of punctuation. They help the writer and the reader as long as everyone remembers that such rules are arbitrary, determined by consensus, convention, and culture.

If you check the end of that last sentence, you will notice that I used a comma before “and” to end a series. For a quarter century, we at the Poynter Institute have argued about that comma. Fans of Strunk and White (that’s me!) put it in. Thrifty journalists take it out. As an American, I spell the word *color* “color,” and I place the comma inside the quotation marks. My cheeky English friend spells it “colour”, and she leaves that poor little croissant out in the cold.

Most punctuation is required, but some is optional, leaving the writer with many choices. My modest goal is to highlight those choices, to transform the formal rules of punctuation into useful tools.

Punctuation comes from the Latin root *punctus*, or “point.” Those funny dots, lines, and squiggles help writers point the way. To help readers, we punctuate for two reasons:

1. To set the pace of reading.
2. To divide words, phrases, and ideas into convenient groupings.

You will punctuate with power and purpose when you begin to consider pace and space.

Think of a long, well-written sentence with no punctuation except the period. Such a sentence is a straight road with a stop sign at the end. The period is the stop sign. Now think of a winding road with lots of stop signs. That analogy describes a paragraph with lots of periods, an effect that will slow the pace of the story. The writer may desire such a pace for strategic reasons: to achieve clarity, convey emotion, or create suspense.

If a period is a stop sign, then what kind of traffic flow is created by other marks? The comma is a speed bump; the semicolon is what a driver education teacher calls a "rolling stop"; the parenthetical expression is a detour; the colon is a flashing yellow light that announces something important up ahead; the dash is a tree branch in the road.

A writer once told me that he knew it was time to hand in a story when he had reached this stage: "I would take out all the commas. Then I would put them all back." The comma may be the most versatile of marks and the one most closely associated with the writer's voice. A well-placed comma points to where the writer would pause if he read the passage aloud. "He may have been a genius, as mutations sometimes are." The author of that line is Kurt Vonnegut. I have heard him speak, and that central comma is his voice.

More muscular than the comma, the semicolon is most useful for dividing and organizing big chunks of information. In his essay "The Lantern-Bearers," Robert Louis Stevenson describes an adventure game in which boys wore cheap tin lanterns — called *bull's-eyes* — under their coats:

We wore them buckled to the waist upon a cricket belt, and over them, such was the rigour of the game, a buttoned top-coat. They

smelled noisomely of blistered tin; they never burned aright, though they would always burn our fingers; their use was naught; the pleasure of them merely fanciful; and yet a boy with a bull's-eye under his top-coat asked for nothing more.

Parentheses introduce a play within a play. Like a detour sign in the middle of a street, they require the driver to maneuver around to regain the original direction. Parenthetical expressions are best kept short and (Pray for us, Saint Nora of Ephron) witty.

My great friend Don Fry has undertaken a quixotic quest to eliminate that tree branch in the road — the dash. "Avoid the dash," he insists as often as William Strunk begged his students to "omit needless words." Don's crusade was inspired by his observation — with which I agree — that the dash has become the default mark for writers who never mastered the formal rules. But the dash has two brilliant uses: a pair of dashes can set off an idea contained within a sentence, and a dash near the end can deliver a punch line.

In his book *Propaganda*, Edward Bernays uses both kinds of dashes to describe the purposes of political persuasion:

Propaganda does exist on all sides of us, and it does change our mental pictures of the world. Even if this be unduly pessimistic — and that remains to be proved — the opinion reflects a tendency that is undoubtedly real.

We are proud of our diminishing infant death rate — and that too is the work of propaganda.

That leaves the colon, and here's what it does: it announces a word, phrase, or clause the way a trumpet flourish in a Shakespeare play sounds the arrival of the royal procession. More from Vonnegut:

I am often asked to give advice to young writers who wish to be famous and fabulously well-to-do. This is the best I have to offer:

While looking as much like a bloodhound as possible, announce that you are working twelve hours a day on a masterpiece. Warning: All is lost if you crack a smile. (from *Palm Sunday*)

Writers store other punctuation arrows in their quiver, including ellipses, brackets, exclamation points, and capital letters. These have formal uses, of course, but in the hands of an inventive writer they can express all the organ stops of voice, pitch, and tone. Here, for example, James McBride describes the power of a preacher in *The Color of Water*:

"We . . . [silence] . . . know . . . today . . . arrhh . . . um . . . I said WEEEE . . . know . . . THAT [silence] ahhh . . . JESUS [church: "Amen!"] . . . ahhh, CAME DOWN . . . ["Yes! Amen!"] I said CAME DOWWWNNNN! ["Go on!"] He CAME-ON-DOWN-AND — LED-THE — PEOPLE-OF — JERU-SALEM-AMEN!"

When it comes to punctuation, all writers develop habits that buttress their styles. Mine include wearing out the comma and using more periods than average. I abhor unsightly blemishes, so I shun semicolons and parentheses. I overuse the colon. I write an exclamation with enough force to avoid the weedy appendage of an exclamation point. I prefer the comma to the dash but sometimes use one — if only to pluck Don Fry's beard.

WORKSHOP

1. Make sure you have a good basic reference to guide you through the rules of punctuation. I favor *A Writer's Reference* by Diana Hacker. For fun, read *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, a humorous if crusty attack by Lynne Truss against faulty punctuation, especially in public texts.

2. Take one of your old pieces and repunctuate it. Add some optional commas, or take some out. Read both versions aloud. Hear a difference?

3. Make conscious decisions on how fast you'd like the reader to move. Perhaps you want readers to zoom across the landscape. Or to tiptoe through a technical explanation. Punctuate accordingly.

4. Reread this section and analyze my use of punctuation. Challenge my choices. Repunctuate it.

5. When you gain confidence, have some fun and use the punctuation marks described above as well as ellipses, brackets, and capital letters. Take inspiration from the passage by James McBride.