1. In 1747 a physician in the British navy conducted an experiment to discover a cure for scurvy.

2. Scurvy was a serious problem for men at sea.

3. Dr. James Lind tried six different remedies.

4. When the men were given oranges and lemons every day, they recovered miraculously.

5. Although it took fifty years for the British Admiralty Office to recognize Lind's findings, it finally ordered a daily dose of fresh lemon juice for every British seaman.

6. Interestingly, Lind's discovery also affected the English language.

7. The British called lemons "limes" in the eighteenth century.

8. Because of that navy diet, people call British sailors "limeys."

KEY TERMS

Active voice	Independent clause	Prepositional phrase
Adverb	Indirect object	Pronoun
Adverbial	Infinitive	Punctuation
Auxiliary verb	Intransitive verb	Referent
Be patterns	Irregular verb	Rhetoric
Clause	Linking verb	Sentence
Declarative sentence	Main clause	Sentence pattern
Dependent clause	Noun phrase	Sentence slots
Direct object	Object complement	Subject
Do support	Passive voice	Subject complement
Grammar	Past participle	Subordinate clause
Headword	Phrase	Transitive verb
Helping verb	Predicate	Verb phrase

PUNCTUATION REMINDER

Have you made sure that a comma does not separate the required slots of your sentences?

The Basic Sentence Patterns in Prose

CHAPTER PREVIEW

In Chapter 1 you read that the sentence patterns you were studying are fairly unusual in their bare, unadorned form. Most of the sentences we read are expanded with noun modifiers or adverbials or compound structures of various kinds. You will read about these expansions in later chapters. When writers do use a bare pattern, it is often—if not usually—for one of two purposes: as a topic sentence or as an attention-getter. In this chapter we focus on the power of short sentences, their rhetorical effectiveness, in these two roles. You'll also have the chance to compare your own prose style, in terms of sentence length, with that of professional writers.

TOPIC SENTENCES

In this chapter you won't be getting instruction for writing or punctuating short sentences—as you have seen, most of them need no punctuation—but you may need instruction in using them. Or maybe *encouragement* is a better word: You may need encouragement in using short sentences. It's not unusual for inexperienced writers to believe that writing calls for long sentences rather than short ones, just as they may believe that writing calls for fancy words rather than plain ones. Both notions are wrong. In Chapter 6 we take up the topic of fancy words in the discussion of diction. Here we consider the effectiveness of short sentences, many of which are bare-bones sentence patterns.

Paragraph Openers

The bare sentence pattern as topic sentence is a common strategy, especially the "something is something" pattern discussed at the opening of Chapter 1 with the Annie Dillard sentence "A weasel is wild." Dillard uses many such sentences as paragraph openers—sometimes with a verb other than a form of *be*, sometimes with an added adverbial, but still very short sentences. These examples are from Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

Today is the winter solstice.

Bear with me one last time.

In September the birds were quiet.

I live in tranquility and trembling.

David McCullough, in his biography of Harry Truman, often opens a long paragraph with a "something is something." Here are examples from a chapter detailing Truman's early years in Missouri:

He had been a big success as a soldier.

The store had been a dismal failure.

His real love, however, was politics.

Politics was personal contact.

These two openers are from Stanley Coren's *The Intelligence of Dogs*:

There are many folk tales about the first dog.

The trail of the early dog is faint.

Most of these short topic sentences are Pattern 2, "Something is something," a sentence model you may have been warned about using. In Chapter 7, "Choosing Verbs," you'll read about the overuse of *be* along with revision possibilities. Certainly, sometimes you'll want to consider an alternative to *be*, especially if you find yourself using it to the exclusion of other verbs. But bear in mind that, given a particular context, *be* sentences can be just as effective, as those of any other verb category. As these examples illustrate, they are commonly used by professional writers to introduce paragraph topics.

Internal Topic Sentences

All of the previous examples are opening topic sentences. But as you know, the topic sentence can also occupy other positions in the paragraph: in the middle or at the end. In the following paragraph, from an *Atlantic* article by James Fallows, the topic sentence is the short third one. It changes the focus from the preceding paragraph on the workplace to the following one about schools.

In most Japanese offices people are busy-looking but are often engaged in busywork. Office ladies bustle back and forth carrying tea, groups of men sit through two-hour meetings to resolve a minor point, and of course there are the long evenings in the restaurants and bars. Something similar is true of the schools. The children are at school for more hours each week than American children, but in any given hour they may be horsing around, entertaining themselves while the teachers take one of their (surprisingly frequent) breaks, conducting "self-improvement" meetings, or scrubbing the floors during dai soji—literally, "big clean-up." (Most schools have no hired janitorial staff.)

The fifth sentence in the following eight-sentence paragraph from a *Smithsonian* article by Michael Parfit has that same gear-shifting purpose; again, it's actually the topic sentence. The four preceding sentences summarize the background and provide transition from the essay's previous paragraphs; the three sentences that follow explain and support this new focus.

It is not surprising that ranchers continue to destroy forests wherever they can in spite of evidence that many Amazon soils don't support grass for long. Brazil's ranchers carry the moral scythe of manifest destiny. Once that energy belonged to the Soldiers of Rubber and their patraos [bosses]. Now the patraos live in dimly lit rooms among their thoughts of the past and wait for barges that don't come. The momentum is in cattle. In Brazil, where land-protection regulations and enforcement officers often fall off the truck between Brasilia and the forest, momentum is more important than law. Recent studies have shown that rain forest is far more valuable intact than burned, but that doesn't matter to momentum. In the United States in 1875 it would also have been more logical economically to have kept the cows and the alfalfa in Connecticut, and ranched bison on the plains.

The sentences in this paragraph, other than the five-word gear-shifting one, average twenty-four words each. In the paragraph about Japan, the two sentences on either side of the middle seven-word sentence have thirty-four and fifty-one words.

Shaping up as an important milestone is the demolition of two large dams in Washington State's Elwha River, which flows from the mountains of Olympic National Park into the Juan de Fuca Strait. Their removal, scheduled to begin in 2008, would occur in stages, and if it goes as planned, the Pacific Northwest will lose only a tiny amount of hydropower and regain a legendary salmon fishery. But there could be problems. Behind Elwha dams are some 18 million cubic yards of accumulated sediment, enough to fill four superdomes, and if a lot of that sediment starts to move downstream at once, the ecological consequences could be severe.

Short, focused sentences like this one and those in the preceding examples are bound to draw the attention of the reader.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

The following paragraph opens a chapter of William W. Warner's *Beautiful Swimmers: Watermen, Crabs and the Chesapeake Bay.* The underlining has been added.

Winter

It can come anytime from the last week in October to the first in December. There will be a fickle day, unseasonably warm, during which two or three minor rain squalls blow across the Bay. The sun appears fitfully in between; sometimes there is distant thunder. A front is passing. The first warning that it is more than an ordinary autumnal leaf-chaser comes near the end. The ragged trailing edge of a normal front is nowhere to be seen. Ominously absent is the steady procession of fleecy white puffball clouds that usually presages two or three days of fine weather. Rather, the front picks up speed and passes so rapidly that it is stormy at one moment and unbelievably clear and cloud-free the next. Then it comes. The wind rises in a few minutes from a placid five or ten knots to a sustained thirty or forty, veering quickly first to the west and then to the northwest. The dry gale has begun. Short and steep seas, so characteristic of the Chesapeake, rise up from nowhere to trip small boats. Inattentive yachtsmen will lose sails and have the fright of their lives. Workboat captains not already home will make for any port.

1. Note that the title word *winter*—which is also the topic here—does not appear in the paragraph, represented only by the pronoun *it.* What effect does that omission have? In what way would *Winter* as the first word, instead of *It,* affect the drama?

2. You saw a three-word, a four-word, and a five-word sentence in this paragraph. What purpose do they serve? How did they affect your reading?

SPECIAL EFFECTS ← *Important—this shows the relevance*

Fiction writers also use short sentences to good advantage, often to evoke the disconnected nature of thoughts and feelings: *effect*

Maybe she misses London. She feels caged, in this country, in this city, in this room. She could start with the room, she could open a window. It's too stuffy in here....

Kat feels her own forehead. She wonders if she's running a temperature. Something ominous is going on behind her back. There haven't been enough phone calls from the magazine; they've been able to muddle on without her, which is bad news. Reigning queens should never go on vacation, or have operations, either. Uneasy lies the head....

She isn't in good shape. She can hardly stand. She stands, despite his offer of a chair. She sees now what she's wanted, what she's been missing. Gerald is what she's been missing; the stable, unfashionable, previous, tight-assed Gerald. Not Ger, not the one she's made in her own image. The other one, before he got ruined.

—Margaret Atwood ("Kat")

Here the short sentence signals a significant detail: *effect*

Francis got home late from town, and Julia got the sitter while he dressed, and then hurried him out of the house. The party was small and pleasant, and Francis settled down to

enjoy himself. A new maid passed the drinks. Her hair was dark, and her face was round and pale and seemed familiar to Francis.

—John Cheever ("The Country Husband")

Sentences from all of the patterns are used for special effects and significant details like these. But when your teacher—or your handbook—recommends that you vary the length of sentences, do bear in mind that these short sentences, these bare-bones patterns, sometimes carry a message that goes beyond the words themselves, a message that tells the reader, "Pay attention! I'm special!"

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Sentences that we have been calling *linking-be sentences* are called *categorical propositions* (CPs) by logicians and rhetoricians. The CP makes an assertion—it states a proposition—about a particular subject. The following linking-*be* sentences illustrate the three basic kinds of CPs:

A. Chunky Monkey is Ben & Jerry's most delicious flavor.

B. New York City is the largest city in the United States.

C. Television is the cause of a great many social problems.

Although all three sentences look alike, in that all three conform to the "something is something" pattern, they are actually quite different. Only one has the potential for being an effective topic sentence. In other words, not all CPs can hold their own as topic sentences.

The CP that makes the best topic sentence is an arguable proposition. It calls up a response in the reader, a response that says "Prove it." And in so doing, it sets up expectations in the reader. Let's look at the responses the typical reader might make to the three sentences here:

A. Chunky Monkey is Ben & Jerry's most delicious flavor.

"How can you say that? It doesn't compare to either New York Super Fudge Chunky or Vanilla Caramel Fudge, if you ask me."

The categorical proposition in (A) is simply a matter of personal taste. It's not arguable: One person's opinion is as valid as the next one's.

B. New York City is the largest city in the United States.

"I know that. Doesn't everyone? Why are you telling me this?"

The CP in (B) is a fact, a statement that can be verified. Although it's fairly common to see facts as paragraph openers, they tend to be weak ones, especially well-known facts, because they give no clue as to their

Common facts are weak opens b/c

purpose. Try to predict where a paragraph with (B) as an opening sentence is going.

C. Television is the cause of a great many social problems.

"I disagree. What proof do you have?"

Like sentence (A), the third also states an opinion, but it's one that's open to debate—an arguable proposition. Because it deals with probability, you can bring evidence to support your side. The reader can infer where this paragraph is going.

Decide which of the following CPs would make good topic sentences. You'll want to think about the way in which a reader would respond:

1. Florida is the ideal place to retire.
2. It is wrong to use animals for testing cosmetics.
3. Jogging is boring.
4. Jogging is a popular sport.
5. Pearls are among nature's most amazing creations.
6. The lemur, a shrewlike creature, is at home both on the ground and in the trees.
7. Playing computer games is a complete waste of time.
8. Movie popcorn is always too salty.
9. History will probably rate Ronald Reagan as one of the great presidents.
10. The tsunami of December 2004 took the lives of over 200,000 people.

Now rewrite the weak topic sentences to improve them, if possible. Also try your hand at revising them to avoid using the linking *be*.

THE SHORT PARAGRAPH

Another attention-getter is the short paragraph that appears on a page of long, well-developed ones. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* Annie Dillard adds drama with an occasional paragraph of one or two sentences, often used for transition from one topic to another. Each of these examples is a complete paragraph:

The woods were restless as birds.

The world has locusts, and the world has grasshoppers. I was up to my knees in the world.

one purpose
effect
one purpose

In his book *Undaunted Courage*, the story of Lewis and Clark's journey to the Pacific, Stephen E. Ambrose often uses the short paragraph of transition:

Thus armed with orders, guns, and goods, Lewis set out to meet the Indians of the Great Plains.

Like short sentences in a paragraph of long ones, these short paragraphs call attention to themselves. They, too, say, "Pay attention!" They, too, should be crafted carefully.

A SENTENCE SURVEY

In his textbook *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (Oxford, 1971), Professor Edward P. J. Corbett reports on a study of style he conducted in his Honors Freshman English class. His students compared the length of their own sentences and paragraphs with those of a professional writer, F. L. Lucas. They selected eight paragraphs from an essay by Lucas, avoiding short transitional paragraphs and any that contained two or more sentences of quoted material. Then they calculated the average number of words per sentence (20.8) and the average number of sentences per paragraph (7.6). In addition, they calculated the percentage of sentences that were ten words longer than the average (17 percent) and the percentage that were five words shorter than average (40 percent). Then they did the same with an expository theme of their own.

Here is Professor Corbett's summary of the findings:

Most of the students found that their average sentence matched the length of Lucas's average sentence. Many of the students were surprised to learn, however, that they had a higher percentage of above-average sentences and a strikingly lower percentage of below-average sentences. Perhaps the most dramatic difference that the students noted was in paragraph development. At least half of the students found that they were averaging between three and four sentences in their paragraphs.

We cannot, of course, judge the effectiveness of a paragraph on the basis of statistics. However, these data certainly confirm the experience of many writing teachers: Their students need encouragement in writing short sentences; they also need encouragement in developing paragraphs.

EXERCISE 6

Do a contrastive study of your own writing style and that of a professional, following Professor Corbett's model. For the analysis, choose eight paragraphs from a magazine article (e.g., *Harper's, Atlantic, New Yorker, Smithsonian, Nature*) or from a professional journal in your major field. For purposes of this analysis, a sentence is defined as "a group of words beginning with a capital letter and ending with some mark of end punctuation." In some cases these sentences will be fragments; even so, you should include them in your analysis. However, among the eight do not include short transitional paragraphs or any paragraph that contains two or more sentences of quoted material. Do the same analysis with eight paragraphs from an expository essay of your own.

	Professional	Student
1. Total number of words	_____	_____
2. Total number of sentences	_____	_____
3. Longest sentence (in # of words)	_____	_____
4. Shortest sentence (in # of words)	_____	_____
5. Average sentence length	_____	_____
6. Number of sentences with more than ten words *over* the average length	_____	_____
7. Percentage of sentences with more than ten words *over* the average	_____	_____
8. Number of sentences with more than five words *below* the average	_____	_____
9. Percentage of sentences with more than five words *below* the average	_____	_____
10. Paragraph length	_____	_____
longest paragraph (in # of sentences)	_____	_____
shortest paragraph (in # of sentences)	_____	_____
average paragraph (in # of sentences)	_____	_____