

Varying Sentence Openers

Evaluate the sentence structures in any piece of published writing—from novels to news articles—and you're sure to notice one thing: sentence variety is the key to writing that flows gracefully from one sentence to the next. If you structure all the sentences in a paragraph the same way, subject followed by verb followed by direct object, for example, your paragraph will sound boring and repetitive. Altering the way in which your own sentences begin is one way to introduce sentence variety and improve the flow of your writing. Some of the ways to vary your sentence openers are listed below.

- **Start with adjectives or adverbs.**
 - *Deep green, shiny, and clear*, the emerald sparkled in the jeweler's case. (adjectives)
 - *Loudly and insistently*, my mother called me to dinner. (adverbs)
- **Start with a prepositional phrase.**
 - *During rush hour*, I avoid the freeway.
- **Start with a participle or participial phrase.**
 - *Shouting his dog's name*, Ross headed for the park. (present participial phrase)
 - *Cooked to perfection*, my father's meal beckoned us to eat. (past participial phrase)
- **Start with an absolute phrase.**
 - *All things considered*, it was a good day.

You can also use more than one of these options, as in the following example:
Quickly, without fanfare, Eliot handed out the gifts. (adverb + prepositional phrase)

Varying Sentence Openers Exercise

Each item below begins with a sentence model from literature that has an interesting sentence opener. Combine the sentences that follow into a single sentence that matches the structure of the literature model. You may omit words or change their forms as you combine sentence parts.

Model from literature:

EXAMPLE:

“Conscience-stricken, Leo rose and brewed the tea.” - Bernard Malamud, "The Magic Barrel"

Beth was satisfied.

Beth pushed her chair back from the dinner table and excused herself.

ANSWER: Satisfied, Beth pushed her chair back from the dinner table and excused herself.

Name _____ Period _____

1. Model: "Fumbling with both hands, he once more stuck the knife into the sheath." - Isak Dinesen, "The Ring"

The members of the band sounded as good as ever.

They were playing together for the first time in years.

Answer?

2. Model: "In his room, he plays his guitar." -John Updike, "Son"

Nate paints watercolors.

He paints them in his mother's studio.

Answer?

3. Model: "Creaking, jerking, jostling, gasping, the train filled the station." -

Nadine Gordimer, "The Train from Rhodesia"

The tractor pushed against the heavy log.

The tractor was grinding, growling, whistling, and hiccuping.

4. Model: "Eyes narrowing, he thought for a few moments about what to do." -Jack Finney, "Contents of the Dead Man's Pocket"

The yacht headed out to open sea.

Sails were billowing.

Answer?:

5. Model: "Gaunt, bruised, and shaken, he stumbled back to his village." -Lame Deer, "The Vision Quest"

The dog was well-fed, energetic, and happy.

The dog headed outside to play.

Answer?

6. Model: "Frightened, everyone in the village fled into the canes." -Paule Marshall, "To Da-duh, in Memoriam"

The bull was angered.

The bull charged the matador.

Name _____ Period _____

7. Model: "The staircase window having been boarded up, no light came down into the hall." -Elizabeth Bowen, "The Demon Lover"

The bicycle tire had been punctured.

Jasmine had to walk the bicycle home.

8. Model: "Patient, cold, and callous, our hands wrapped in socks, we waited to snowball the cats." - Dylan Thomas, "A Child's Christmas in Wales"

The producer accepted the Oscar for best picture.

She was wide-eyed, joyful, and proud.

Her head was lifted high.

Answer?

9. Model: "Slowly, taking my time, I began the final ascent." -Arthur C. Clarke, "The Sentinel"

Leo ran toward the goal line.

He ran swiftly.

He was holding the football firmly in his arms.

Answer?

10. Model: "For the first time since my arrival, I was very nearly home." -Maya Angelou, All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes

Polly was ready to run a five-minute mile.

She was ready for more than a month.

Answer?