

# The Cumulative Sentence

How to Recognize One  
And How to Write One

# The Cumulative Sentence

Let's start with a base:

**He grabbed her hand.**

Let's then begin to add modifiers to it, to accumulate detail:

**He grabbed her hand, his heart pounding.**

## The Cumulative Sentence

We can continue this process (perhaps to excess):

**He grabbed her hand, his heart pounding, his knees shaking, his head spinning, his palms sweating, his fright slowly fading away.**

The result of all of this is that we now have a fully detailed image contained within a single sentence. Cumulative sentences do this to prose--create the opportunity for depth and precision:

**He grabbed her hand, his heart pounding, his knees shaking, his head spinning, his palms sweating, his fright slowly fading away.**

Seen another way, a more numerical way, we can consider the sentence like this:

- (1) He grabbed her hand,**
- (2) his heart pounding,**
- (2) his knees shaking,**
- (2) his head spinning,**
- (2) his palms sweating,**
- (2) his fright slowly fading away.**

**I can create or recreate a whole series of variations of this one sentence by simply varying the sentence arrangement. Each variation creates a slightly different effect for the reader**

- (2) His heart pounding,**
- (2) his knees shaking,**
- (2) his head spinning,**
- (2) his palms sweating,**
- (2) his fright slowly fading away,**
- (1) He grabbed her hand.**

**(see what happens when I drop the “His” from the first 4 phrases)**

- (2) Heart pounding,
- (2) knees shaking,
- (2) head spinning,
- (2) palms sweating,
- (2) his fright slowly fading away,
- (1) He grabbed her hand.

**BTW, this is also an example of a PERIODIC SENTENCE.**

**Better still, let's create a little suspense by a slight adjustment with the base clause.**

- (2) Heart pounding,
- (2) knees shaking,
- (2) head spinning,
- (2) palms sweating,
- (1) He grabbed her hand,
- (2) his fright slowly fading away.

**Now that's an effective sentence. That last line is especially emphasized because it is separated from the others.**



**Here's a variation of the cumulative which we increasingly build the detail behind each modifier, ending, at last, in a simile. This is an effective way to build detail for a simple metaphor.**

**He dipped his hands in the bichloride solution and shook them, like the fingers of pianist above the keys.**

- (1) He dipped his hands in the bichloride solution and shook them,**
- (2) a quick shake,**
- (3) fingers down,**
- (4) like the fingers of pianist above the keys.**