

Go Forth and Multiply...Or Subtract: **A Sentence Variation Exercise**

This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety.

Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of drums, the crash of cymbals--the sounds that say listen to this, it is important.

--Gary Provost

So write with a combination of short, medium, and long sentences. Create a sound that pleases the reader's ear. Don't just write words. Write music.

EXERCISE:

The following three excerpts come from successful professional writers. Your job is to deconstruct the sentences and turn the brief sample paragraphs into lifeless, five-word sentences.

Reflect on what is lost to you as a reader when the writing takes on a predictable form.

"Block of Death. Just inside the door on the left is the room where they held the proceedings. Jarek remarks that the SS officer who sentenced five thousand Poles here to die was still alive last year, living in Germany, age ninety-two. We ask why. He shrugs. At the far end of the corridor, on the left, looking out into the courtyard, is the room where the condemned were stripped and held. An illustration depicts a naked girl holding on to her mother's legs as the SS guard comes for them. High on the wall, a prisoner scratched graffiti, a name and the date and the words, "Sentenced to die." Beneath that is the date of the next day and the words, "I'm still here."

--Christopher Buckley, *Auschwitz*

"Humanity today is like a waking dreamer, caught between the fantasies of sleep and the chaos of the real world. The mind seeks but cannot find the precise place and hour. We have created a Star Wars civilization, with Stone Age emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike technology. We thrash about. We are terribly confused by the mere fact of our existence, and a danger to ourselves and to the rest of life."

--Edwin O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth*

"We go through life seeing reality not as it really is, in its unfathomable depths of complexity and contradiction, but as we hope or fear or expect it to be. Too often, we confuse certainty for truth and the strength of our beliefs for the strength of the evidence. When we collide with the unexpected, with the antipode to our hopes, we are plunged into bewildered despair. We rise from the pit only by love. Perhaps Keats had it slightly wrong — perhaps truth is love and love is truth."

--Maria Popova, *Figuring*