

A range of sentences

Using a variety of sentence structures is important to make your writing interesting and ... if you are doing English Year 9 NCTs they will help you get a level 5.

Level 5 – Writing:

Pupils' writing is varied and interesting, conveying meaning clearly in a range of forms for different readers, using a more formal style where appropriate. Vocabulary choices are imaginative and words are used precisely. Sentences, including complex ones, and paragraphs are coherent, clear and well developed. Words with complex regular patterns are usually spelt correctly. A range of punctuation, including commas, apostrophes and inverted commas, is usually used accurately. Handwriting is joined, clear and fluent and, where appropriate, is adapted to a range of tasks.

I've put in bold and italics the parts that we will be focusing on with these tasks.

A definition of sentence types:

Simple sentences communicate one idea:

I own a dog.

Compound sentences communicate more than one idea by linking two simple sentences with *and*, *but*, or *or*.

I own a dog and I have to walk it.

Complex sentences communicate more than one idea through clauses. At least one will be the main clause, which gives the main meaning of the sentence and there will be one or more subordinate clauses, which add information to help us understand the context (or the other things which add meaning to the statement):

I go out for a walk, even when it's raining, because I own a dog.

Exploring how sentence variety makes writing interesting:

Sentences need to be varied in order to maintain the reader's interest. Look at the paragraphs below, which are all descriptions of soldiers' experiences of the First World War and decide what could be improved in each example.

1. I am a soldier. We know we have to fight. I look over the trench. It is dark. I can't see much. I am afraid. I know I have to do it. I wait for the order. The wait is ages. Someone starts whistling quietly. Someone says be quiet. He says it's nearly time. I wish I was at home.
2. I am a soldier and I know I have to fight but I don't want to and I am afraid and I can not see in the dark but someone strikes a match and someone else says put it out and I try to ignore them all and then someone says it's nearly time and I don't like waiting and I wish I was at home.
3. Because I am a soldier, I know I have to fight, which would be okay, but I am always afraid, because it always seems dark out here, however there is much camaraderie because of the circumstances, even though we lose friends all the time, so that it is difficult to know from one day to the next who your friends are.

You have probably recognised that number 1 uses all simple sentences, number 2 is a compound sentence and number 3 is a complex sentence but none of them are perfect are they?

In other words, it is not enough to decide that you will make every sentence a complex one in order to make your writing more interesting: you need to use a variety. Simple sentences can be effective in giving instructions or building up tension, compound sentences can help highlight contrasts or show how a series of events happen, whilst complex sentences give us context to the information and enable the reader to picture the atmosphere much more easily.

Doing more than identifying

There is no point being able to spot a simple, compound or complex sentence if you then can't give a reason for pointing it out:

1. If you're asked in an exam: Why does the writer have the sentences, 'It was cold. The rain fell. The door creaked.'? You will not get any marks for writing, 'Because they are all simple sentences.' The writer hasn't written them because they are simple sentences but *because simple sentences help increase tension.*
2. Furthermore, if you are asked, Why does the author start with the sentence, 'The sun beat down and the warmth rose off the pavements but Rob's heart raced'? You will not get any marks for writing, 'Because it is a compound sentence.' Again, the fact that it is compound is not why the author used it but: *because the list like nature of the compound sentence, with no pause for breath, helps the reader understand the fear that Rob feels and the contrast between the sunny day and his feelings.*
3. Now you try: Why has the writer started this piece of writing with the sentence, 'Although she had been told that on no account was she to open the wardrobe, she peered inside carefully, moving the clothes back as she did so.'? Remember, don't just comment that it is a complex sentence: explain what the effect of the complex sentence is.

Using a variety of sentences in your writing

Now you have a go at using a variety of sentence structures in a piece of writing. You will be guided by your teacher as to what the writing should be about. You might be asked to:

- Explain, inform, describe
- Argue, advise, persuade
- Analyse, comment, review
- Imagine, explore, entertain

Whatever it is you're asked to write, remember to use a variety of sentence structures and be able to justify (explain to someone else) why you have used them.

Once you've written the first paragraph or two, it is worth going back through your writing and highlighting or underlining, in different colours, your use of each of the sentence types to ensure you have remembered to include a range of them.