

Ten Ways to Vary Sentences

Excerpts from Scott Russell Sander's "Doing Time in the Thirteenth Chair"

1. Use an incomplete sentence (but do so sparingly).

The clock ticks. The judge assures us that we should be finished in five days, just in time for Christmas.

Ticktock. The judge assures us that we should be finished in five days, just in time for Christmas.

2. Use noun appositives to elaborate your simple sentences

The facts are a mess. They are full of gaps.

The facts are a mess. They are full of gaps, chuckholes, switchbacks, and dead ends—just like life.

3. Use verbal appositives to elaborate your simple sentences

Even the judge grows bored during this tedious business. He yawns.

Even the judge grows bored during this tedious business. He yawns, tips back in his chair, sips coffee from a mug, folds and unfolds with deft thumbs a square paper about the size of a cocaine packet.

4. Use adjective appositives to elaborate your simple sentences.

How can they expect me, a fiction writer, to confine myself to facts? I am unreliable.

How can they expect me, a fiction writer, to confine myself to facts? I am unreliable, a confessed fabulist, a marginal Quaker and Wobbly socialist, a man so out of phase with my community that I am thrown into fits of rage by the local newspaper.

5. Use prepositional appositives to elaborate your simple sentences.

They both speak well.

They both speak well, without hemming and hawing, without stumbling over syntactical cliffs.

6. Combine simple sentences to create a compound sentence

I stick my head out the door. I swallow some air.

I stick my head out the door and swallow some air.

7. Imbed a noun phrase into your compound sentence.

Next the judge reads a list of names and twelve sworn citizens shuffle into the jury box.

Next the judge reads a list of names, none of them mine, and twelve sworn citizens shuffle into the jury box.

8. Imbed appositions into your compound sentences with parallel structure.

We hear from the police officers in uniform and from mustachioed officers in civvies.

We hear from the police officers in uniform, their handcuffs clanking, and from mustachioed officers in civvies, revolvers bulging under their suitcoats.

9. Vary your simple sentences further by creating complex sentences.

I listen to the minutes click away.

Listening to the minutes click away, I imagine bombs or mechanical hearts sealed behind the limestone.

10. Elaborate complex sentence with appositions.

The second admission is so faint that I must lean forward to hear it. While the prosecutor lets this damning confession sink into the jury, the rabbit brother just sits there.

The second admission is so faint, like a wheeze, that I must lean forward to hear it, even though I am less than two yards away. While the prosecutor lets this damning confession sink into the jury, the rabbit brother just sits there, as if exposed on a rock while the hawks dive, his eyes pinched closed.

Can you identify the following sentence?

Bennie may do as many as fifty-four years in prison, buying his drugs from meaner dealers, dreaming of land mines and of his adopted girls, checking the date on his watch, wondering at what precise moment the hinges of his future slammed shut.