Sentences: Structure and Purpose

Despite the seemingly endless amount of ways that sentences can be written, they can all be classified in two ways: in terms of structure, and in terms of purpose.

**Sentence Structure**

There are four different sentence structures: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. Each structure is determined by both the number and type of clauses it contains.

- a **simple sentence** contains just an independent clause:
  
  Robert drove like a maniac.

  *Independent Clause*

- a **compound sentence** contains two independent clauses:
  
  Robert drove like a maniac, yet he managed to arrive home safely.

  *Independent Clause* *

  *Independent Clause*

- a **complex sentence** contains one independent clause and at least one subordinate clause.
  
  If Robert drove safely, his mother could sleep better at night.

  *Subordinate Clause*

  *Independent Clause*

- a **compound-complex sentence** contains a minimum of two independent clauses, in addition to at least one subordinate clause.
  
  If Robert drove safely, his mother thought, I could sleep better at night.

  *Subordinate Clause*

  *Independent Clause*

  *Independent Clause*

While it’s up to the writer to determine which sentence structures to use, it’s generally a good idea to vary sentence structure. Too many simple sentences in a row can make a paragraph seem choppy and disconnected, whereas too many compound-complex sentences in a row can over-complicate a paragraph, muddying the writer’s ideas and alienating the reader.

**Sentence Purposes**

Just as there are four different sentence structures, there are four basic sentence purposes.

- a **declarative sentence** makes a statement, or declaration:
  
  *Cake is delicious.*

- an **imperative sentence** is used to command or request:
  
  *I want more cake now.*
• an **interrogative sentence** poses a question: 
  
  *Do you like cake?*

• an **exclamatory sentence** exclaims something: 
  
  *Cake is the best dessert ever!*

---

This handout is adapted from University of Alabama Writing Center Website. Only the format has been changed.