Focus 3

Sentence Combining

Sentence combining is the process of blending two or more related sentences into one sentence. Unlike sentence unscrambling and sentence imitating, in which you were given the structure for the sentence parts, sentence combining provides only the content. You provide the sentence structure in which to express that content.

Before combining sentences, try decombining them. Decombining professionally written sentences provides much insight into good writing. Here are three examples:

Sentence Decombining: Short Sentence

Silently, desperately, he fought with all his weapons.

Katherine Anne Porter, Ship of Fools

1. It was done silently.
2. It was done desperately.
3. He fought.
4. The fighting was done with weapons.
5. All of the weapons were used.
6. All of the weapons were his.

Sentence Decombining: Medium Sentence

Once his back happened to be half turned toward the door, and, hearing a noise there, he wheeled and sprang up, uttering a loud cry.

Stephen Crane, “The Blue Hotel”

1. Once something happened.
2. What happened was that his back happened to be half turned.
3. His back was half turned toward the door.
4. During this time he heard a noise there.
5. Upon hearing it, he wheeled.
6. Upon hearing it, he sprang up.
7. During the wheeling and the springing up, he was doing something.
8. He was uttering a loud cry.

Sentence Decombining: Long Sentence

He backed Jack up against the ropes, measured him and then hooked the left very lightly to the side of Jack’s head and socked the right into the body as hard as he could sock, just as low as he could get it.

Ernest Hemingway, “Fifty Grand”

1. He backed Jack up.
2. The backing was against the ropes.
3. He measured him.
4. Then he hooked the left.
5. The hook was very light.
6. The hook was to the side of the head.
7. The head was Jack’s.
8. He socked the right.
9. He socked it into the body.
10. The socking was as hard as he could sock.
11. The socking was just as low as he could get it.

Practice 1

Decombine each of the sentences below. The number of sentences you can list is not fixed. Try for more rather than fewer sentences. In doing so, you’ll become more conscious of the greater economy, variety, and maturity of the original sentence.
1. The fixer got up on his raw hands and bleeding knees and went on, blindly crawling across the yard.
   *Bernard Malamud, The Fixer*

2. She flicked her wrist neatly out of Doctor Harry's pudgy careful fingers and pulled the sheet up to her chin.
   *Katherine Anne Porter, "The Filing of Granny Weatherall"*

3. On the table, covered with oilcloth figured with clusters of blue grapes, a place was set, and he smelled hot coffee-cake of some kind.
   *Willa Cather, "Neighbor Rosicky"*

4. She cleared away the smoking things, then drew back the cotton bedspread from the bed she had been sitting on, took off her slippers, and got into bed.
   *J. D. Salinger, Franny and Zooey*

5. The driver of the car stopped it, slamming it to a skidding halt on the greasy pavement without warning, actually flinging the two passengers forward until they caught themselves with their braced hands against the dash.
   *William Faulkner, "Delta Autumn"*

**Practice 2**

Each of the lists of sentences below was derived from a single sentence by a professional writer. Combine all of the sentences into just one sentence, following the order of the list. Punctuate correctly. After you complete each one, compare your sentence with the original in the References on page 160.

1a. The boy watched.

1b. During the watching, his eyes did something.

1c. His eyes were bulging.

1d. All of this occurred in the dark.
   *From Edmund Ware, "An Underground Episode"*

2a. One of the dogs had done something.

2b. This dog was the best one of all the dogs.

2c. It had disappeared.
   *From Fred Gipson, Old Yeller*

3a. Doctor Parcival was jumping to his feet.

3b. At the same time he was breaking off the tale.

3c. Doctor Parcival began to walk up and down.

3d. The office in which he walked was of the *Winesburg Eagle*.

3e. In that office was where someone sat.

3f. The someone was George Willard.

3g. As George sat, he was listening.
   *From Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio*

4a. This land was waterless.

4b. It was furred with cacti.

4c. The cacti could store water.

4d. In addition, the land was furred with the great-rooted brush.

4e. The brush could reach deep into the earth.

4f. The brush would do this for a little moisture.

4g. The brush could get along on very little moisture.
   *From John Steinbeck, The Pearl*

5a. It glided through.

5b. As it glided, it brushed the twigs.

5c. The twigs were overhanging.

5d. In addition, it disappeared from the river.
Practice 3

Combine each list of sentences twice to produce two different versions to practice variety. You needn’t necessarily stick to the order of ideas in the list. You may use any arrangement you think will produce a good sentence. Compare your best sentences with the authors’ in the References on page 160. Which are better? Why?

1a. The house was most enjoyable.
   b. The house was in the country.
   c. The enjoyment of the house was on a particular afternoon.
   d. The afternoon was wintry.
      From James Thurber, "The Owl in the Attic"

2a. The earth was bloody in the setting light.
   b. The bloodiness was caused by the sun.
   c. The sun was setting.
   d. At the same time, the truck came back.
      From John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath

3a. He moves nervously.
   b. He moves fast.
   c. His movement, however, has a restraint.

4a. The girls stood aside.
   b. The very small children rolled in the dust.
   c. Some children clung to the hands of their older brothers or sisters.
   d. The girls were doing two things.
   e. They looked over their shoulders at the boys.
   f. They talked among themselves.
      From John Hersey, Hiroshima

5a. The cake was shaped in a frying pan.
   b. He took flour.
   c. He took oil.
   d. He shaped them into a cake.
   e. The stove functioned on gas.
   f. The gas was bottled.
   g. He lighted the stove.
   h. The stove was little.
      From Shirley Jackson, "The Lottery"

Practice 4

In this Practice, combine the sentences in the lists using the fewest possible words to practice economy. The number of words in the author’s sentence is indicated. Don’t worry about using that exact number, but try not to exceed it by much. Compare your sentences with the originals in the References on pages 160–161.

1a. He distributed handbills for merchants.
    b. He did this, and the following activities, from ages ten to fifteen.
c. He held horses.
d. He ran confidential errands.

Word Count: 15

From Thornton Wilder, The Bridge of San Luis Rey

2a. Nick looked down into the water.
b. The water was clear.
c. The water was brown.
d. The brown color came from the pebbly bottom.
e. As Nick looked down he watched the trout.
f. The trout were keeping themselves steady in the current.
g. They kept themselves steady with their fins.
h. Their fins were wavering.

Word Count: 25

From Ernest Hemingway, “Big Two-Hearted River”

3a. On one side was a tiny meadow.
b. The meadow began at the very lip of the pool.
c. The meadow had a surface of green.
d. The surface was cool.
e. The surface was resilient.
f. The surface extended.
g. The surface extended to the base.
h. The base was of the browning wall.

Word Count: 30

From Jack London, “All Gold Cañon”

4a. In the stillness of the air many things in the forest seemed to have been bewitched.
b. They were bewitched into an immobility.

c. The immobility was perfect.
d. The immobility was final.
e. Every tree seemed bewitched.
f. Every leaf seemed bewitched.
g. Every bough seemed bewitched.
h. Every tendril of creeper seemed bewitched.
i. Every petal of minute blossoms seemed bewitched.

Word Count: 33 (long sentence)

From Joseph Conrad, “The Lagoon”

Practice 5

Combine sentences to create paragraphs. The number of words contained in the original sentence is indicated. Approximate it. Try for clear meaning, word economy, and sentence variety. Compare your results with the originals in the References on page 161.

Paragraph 1

Narration of a bull fight from “The Undefeated” by Ernest Hemingway:

1a. Manuel waved his hand.
b. Manuel was leaning against the barrera.
c. Manuel was watching the bull.
d. And the gypsy ran out.
e. The gypsy was trailing his cape.

Word Count: 19 (medium sentence)

2a. The bull pivoted.
b. The bull was in full gallop.
c. And the bull charged the cape.
d. The bull’s head was down.
e. The bull’s tail was rising.
Word Count: 16 (medium sentence)
3a. The gypsy moved.
b. The movement was in a zigzag.
c. And as he passed, the bull caught sight of him.
d. The bull abandoned the cape.
e. The reason for the abandonment was to charge the man.
Word Count: 24 (medium sentence)
4a. The gypsy sprinted and vaulted the red fence.
b. The red fence was of the barrera.
c. As the gypsy sprinted and vaulted, the bull struck something.
d. The bull struck the red fence of the barrera.
e. The bull struck it with his horns.
Word Count: 19 (medium sentence)
5a. He tossed it with his horns.
b. He tossed it twice.
c. He was banging into the wood.
d. He was banging blindly.
Word Count: 13 (short sentence)

Paragraph 2
Description and explanation of a native African bushman dance from The Harmless People by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas:
1a. To have a dance the women do certain things.
b. They sit in a circle.
c. Their babies are on their backs.
d. Their babies are asleep.
e. The women sing medicine songs.
f. The songs are sung in several parts.
g. The songs are sung in falsetto voices.
h. During the singing the women clap their hands.
i. The clapping is done in rhythm.
j. The rhythm is sharp.
k. The rhythm is staccato.
l. The rhythm is at counterpoint to the rhythm of their voices.
Word Count: 43 (long sentence)
2a. Behind their backs the men dance.
b. The men dance one behind the other.
c. The men circle slowly around.
d. The men take steps.
e. The steps are very short.
f. The steps are pounding.
g. The steps are at counterpoint to both the rhythms.
h. One of the rhythms is the rhythm of the singing.
i. The other rhythm is the rhythm of the clapping.
Word Count: 33 (long sentence)
3a. Now and then the men do two things.
b. They, sing, too.
c. They sing in their deeper voices.
d. Another thing they do is use their dance rattles.
e. Their rattles are made from dry cocoons.
f. The cocoons are strung together with sinew cords.
g. Their dance rattles are tied to their legs.
h. Their dance rattles add a sharp, high clatter.
i. The high clatter is like the sound of shaken gourds.
j. The rattling sound is very well timed.
k. The good timing is because the men step accurately.

Word Count: 49 (long sentence)

4a. A Bushman dance is a pattern.
b. The pattern is infinitely complicated.
c. The pattern consists of two things.
d. One thing is of voices.
e. The other thing is of rhythm.
f. The pattern is an orchestra of bodies.
g. The pattern is making music that has two characteristics.
h. One characteristic is that the music is infinitely varied.
i. The other characteristic is that the music is always precise.

Word Count: 25 (medium sentence)

Practice 6

Here, the sentence breaks aren’t indicated. For each paragraph:

1. Decide how many sentences to combine into just one sentence. Do this by combining all sentences that have related content and arranging the content in the best order.
2. Vary the sentence lengths (short, medium, and long) as we as the structures.

The number of words and sentences contained in the author’s paragraph is indicated. Use it as a rough guideline. You need not stick to the order of the content in the list of sentences. Use any order that is smooth and logical. Compare your paragraphs with the originals in the References on page 162.

Paragraph 1

Description of a Victorian house from The Martian Chronicles by Ray Bradbury. (The author’s paragraph has 90 words and four sentences.)

1. Outside stood an iron deer.
2. It stood upon this lawn.
3. Further up on the green stood a Victorian house.
4. The house was tall.
5. The house was brown.
6. The house was quiet in the sunlight.
7. The house was all covered with scrolls and roccoco.
8. The house’s windows were made of blue colored glass.
9. The house’s windows were made of pink colored glass.
10. The house’s windows were made of yellow colored glass.
11. The house’s windows were made of green colored glass.
12. Upon the porch were two things.
13. One was geraniums.
14. The geraniums were hairy.
15. The other was a swing.
16. The swing was old.
17. The swing was hooked into the porch ceiling.
18. The swing now swung back and forth, back and forth.
19. The swinging occurred in a little breeze.
20. A cupola was at the summit of the house.
21. The cupola had diamond leaded-glass windows.
22. The cupola had a dunce-cap roof!

Paragraph 2
A scene at dusk from *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson.
(The author's paragraph has 134 words and five sentences.)

1. Upon the veranda a man walked up and down.
2. He was little.
3. He was fat.
4. He walked nervously.
5. The veranda was half decayed.
6. The veranda was of a small frame house.
7. The house stood near the edge of a ravine.
8. The ravine was near the town of Winesburg, Ohio.
9. The man could see the public highway.
10. He could see the highway across a long field.
11. The field had been seeded for clover.
12. But it had produced only a dense crop of weeds.
13. The weeds were yellow mustard weeds.
14. A wagon went along the public highway.
15. The wagon was filled with berry pickers.
16. The berry pickers were returning from the fields.
17. The berry pickers were youths.
18. The berry pickers were maidens.
19. The berry pickers laughed.
20. The berry pickers shouted.
21. They shouted boisterously.
22. A boy leaped from the wagon.
23. The boy was clad in a shirt.
24. The shirt was blue.
25. The boy attempted to drag after him one of the maidens.
26. The maiden screamed.
27. The maiden protested.
28. She protested shrilly.
29. The feet of the boy in the road kicked up a cloud.
30. The cloud was of dust.
31. The dust cloud floated across the face of the sun.
32. The sun was departing.

Practice 7
Select two paragraphs, each at least ten sentences in length, from a piece of writing you've recently done. The paragraphs may be from the same piece of writing or from two different ones. For each paragraph, using sentence combining, reduce the ten sentences to seven or fewer. In the revised sentences, aim for variety of sentence structure and length.