Grammar Focus:
Cumulative, Periodic, and Inverted Sentences
Sentence Patterns

- Most of the time, writers of English use the following standard sentence patterns:
  - Subject/Verb (SV)
    - My father cried. - Terry Tempest Williams
  - Subject/Verb/Subject Complement (SVC)
    - Even the streams were now lifeless. - Rachel Carson
  - Subject/Verb/Direct Object (SVO)
    - We believed her. - Terry Tempest Williams
Coordinating & Subordinating Patterns

• To make longer sentences, writers often coordinate two or more of the standard sentence patterns or subordinate one sentence pattern to another.

• Coordinating Patterns:
  • (SVC, SVO)
    • Yet every one of these disasters has actually happened somewhere, and many real communities have already suffered a substantial number of them. -Rachel Carson

• Subordinating Patterns:
  • (SV, SVO)
    • And when they arrived on the edge of Mercury, they carried all the butterflies of a summer day in their wombs.
      -Terry Tempest Williams
The Problem with the Patterns

- The downside to sticking with standard sentence patterns, coordinating them, or subordinating them is that too many standard sentences in a row becomes monotonous. So writers break out of the standard patterns now and then by using a more unusual pattern, such as the cumulative sentence, the periodic sentence, or the inverted sentence.

- When you use one of these sentence patterns, you call attention to that sentence because its pattern contrasts significantly with the pattern of the sentences surrounding it. You can use unusual sentence patterns to emphasize a point, as well as to control sentence rhythm, increase tension, or create a dramatic impact. In other words, using the unusual pattern helps you avoid monotony in your writing.
Cumulative Sentence

• The cumulative (loose) sentence begins with a standard sentence pattern (in orange) and adds multiple details after it. The details may be in subordinate clauses or different kinds of phrases. The details pile up or accumulate — hence the name cumulative.

• Examples:
  • The women moved through the streets as winged messengers, twirling around each other in slow motion, peeking inside home and watching the easy sleep of men and women. -Terry Tempest Williams
  • We have grown into everywhere, spreading like a new growth over the entire surface, touching and affecting every other kind of life, incorporating ourselves. -Lewis Thomas
Periodic Sentence

• The periodic sentence begins with multiple details and holds off a standard sentence pattern until the end.

• Examples:

  • Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. -Ralph Waldo Emerson

  • Human beings, large terrestrial metazoans, fired by energy from microbial symbionts lodged in their cells, instructed by tapes of nucleic acid stretching back to the earliest live membranes, informed by neurons essentially the same as all the other neurons on earth, sharing structures with mastodons and lichens, living off the sun, are now in charge, running the place, for better or worse. -Lewis Thomas

  • Lewis Thomas presents his subject, human beings, followed by several modifiers, with the predicate at the end.
In every standard English sentence pattern, the subject comes before the verb (SV). But if a writer chooses, he or she can invert the standard sentence pattern and put the verb before the subject (VS).

Examples:

- Everywhere was a shadow of death. -Rachel Carson
- Controlled exponential growth is what you’d really like to see. -Joy Williams
- What’s at stake as they busy themselves are your tax dollars and mine, and ultimately our freedom too. -E. O. Wilson
- In the woods, is perpetual youth. -Ralph Waldo Emerson
A Quick Note on Punctuation

• It is important to follow the normal rules of comma usage when punctuating unusual sentence patterns.

• For example:
  • In a cumulative sentence, the descriptors that follow the main clause need to be set off from it and from one another with commas.
  • Likewise, in a periodic sentence, the series of clauses or phrases that precede the subject should be set off from the subject and from one another by commas.
  • When writing an inverted sentence, you may be tempted to insert a comma between the verb and the subject because of the unusual order—but don’t (unless you’re Ralph Waldo Emerson).
For each of the following, craft a periodic, cumulative, or inverted sentence by filling in the blanks.

1. Among the tangle of weeds and brush were _____________________.
2. Hoping, knowing __________, but realizing __________, the candidate ____________________________.
3. All his life he would remember that fateful moment when the fish ____________, ____________, ________________.
4. If you _________________ and if you _______________, then _________________.
5. Into the clouds soared ________________________________.
6. Only when _________________ will _________________________.

**CP&I Sentences: Exercise 1**
In the end, I understand perfectly well that defiance may mean prosperity and a sort of security – that more dams will help the people of Phoenix, and that genetic engineering will help the sick, and that there is so much progress that can still be made against human misery. And I have no great desire to limit my way of life. If I thought we could put off the decision, foist it on our grandchildren, I’d be willing. As it is, I have no plans to live in a cave, or even an unheated cabin. If it took ten thousand years to get where we are, it will take a few generations to climb back down. But this could be the epoch when people decide at least to go no farther down the path we’ve been following – when we make not only the necessary technological adjustments to preserve the world from overheating but also the necessary mental adjustments to ensure that we’ll never again put our good ahead of everything else’s. This is the path I choose, for it offers at least a shred of hope for a living, eternal, meaningful world.
Paragraph 18 from *The Future of Life* by E.O. Wilson consists of three sentences: a simple declarative sentence, then a periodic sentence, and finally a cumulative sentence. Keep the first one as it is; then rewrite the periodic sentence as cumulative and the cumulative as periodic. Compare the two paragraphs. Discuss the relationship among the sentences in each paragraph and the rhetorical effect of syntax on meaning and tone.

The guiding principles of a united environmental movement must be, and eventually will be, chiefly long-term. If two hundred years of history of environmentalism have taught us anything, it is that a change of heart occurs when people look beyond themselves to others, and then to the rest of life. It is strengthened when they also expand their view of landscape, from parish to nation and beyond, and their sweep of time from their own life spans to multiple generations and finally to the extended future history of humankind.
The following selections are from paragraph 11 of “A Naturalist in the Supermarket” by Michael Pollan. Identify whether the sentences are cumulative or periodic. Discuss the effect of the syntax in each case. Then, imitating the structure of each, write a sentence of your own on an environmental issue.

- For modified or unmodified starch, for glucose syrup and maltodextrin, for crystalline fructose and ascorbic acid, for lecithin and dextrose, lactic acid and lysine, for maltose and HFCS, for MSG and polyols, for the caramel color and xanthan gum, read: corn.

- Corn is in the coffee whitener and Cheez Whiz, the frozen yogurt and TV dinner, the canned fruit and ketchup and candies, the soups and snacks and cake mixes, the frosting and gravy and frozen waffles, the syrups and hot sauces, the mayonnaise and mustard, the hot dogs and the bologna, the margarine and shortening, the salad dressings and the relishes and even the vitamins.

- Indeed, the supermarket itself – the wallboard and joint compound, the linoleum and fiberglass and adhesives out of which the building itself has been built – is in no small measure a manifestation of corn.
Following are five examples of unusual sentence patterns. Choose two; then write your own sentences, using each example as a model.

1. Neither in it clearness, its colour, its fantasy of motion, its calmness of space, depth, and reflection or its wrath, can water be conceived by a low-lander, out of sight of sea. -John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*

2. There are hills, rounded, blunt, burned, squeezed up out of chaos, chrome and vermillion painted, aspiring to the snow-line. -Mary Austin, “The Land of Little Rain”

3. The yucca bristles with bayonet-pointed leaves, dull green, growing shaggy with age, tipped with panicles of fetid, greenish bloom. -Mary Austin, “The Land of Little Rain”

4. Scores of millions of years before man had risen from the shores of the ocean to perceive its grandeur and to venture forth upon its turbulent waves, this eternal sea existed, larger than any other of the earth’s features, vaster than the sister oceans combined, wild, terrifying in its immensity and imperative in its universal role. -James Michener, *Hawaii*