The Sentence as a Mentor Text: The Art of Imitation

Writers know the power of variety in writing. Varying sentence beginnings, patterns, lengths, and structures adds interest and a musical quality to the reading. With variety, ideas flow, giving rhythm and balance to images. Furthermore, cadence and structure can enhance mood or present content more effectively and clearly. The normal, traditional sentence begins with a subject-verb pattern. And this is a fine strategy for about half of your sentences. However, to avoid monotony, writers need some tools, some pen strokes to increase reader involvement and to hold interest.

Writers can vary sentence beginnings by opening with a modifier (a single adjective or adverb, an adjective pair), a transitional expression, a phrase (prepositional, participial, infinitive, absolute, appositive), or an adverb clause. Students can invent their own, imitate provided patterns, or mirror the style of a mentor text. Remember, imitation is not plagiarism. We are not copying content; we are imitating style, structure, and form. Research suggests that novice writers master the skills of rhetoric through imitation of the masters. The following sentences offer practice with syntax patterns. Imitate the style of the sentences below by copying the original onto your paper and then writing your own version of the structure modeled. The first two provide examples.

The gallows stood in a small yard, separate from the main grounds of the prison and overgrown with tall prickly weeds. --George Orwell

Imitation: The students stared at the screen, confused by the assignment and wondering about this strange new task.

If one must worship a bully, it is better that he should be a policeman than a gangster. –Orwell

Imitation: If Dr. Miller continues to require such strange tasks, it is good that responses are valued more for participation than for quality.

Adverbs
Unhurriedly, we admired the blossoms' shades, their symmetry, their aromas. --Paul Fleischmann

High on his gorgeous throne, Satan raised the question whether they shall risk a battle for the recovery of Heaven, their just inheritance, and whether they shall proceed by force or guile. –John Milton

Adjectives
Red-eyed and snuffling and shrill, I alarmed the nearest foreman. –Ivan Doig

Calico-coated, small bodied, with delicate legs and pink faces in which their mismatched eyes rolled wild and subdued, they huddled, gaudy, motionless, and alert; wild as deer, deadly as rattlesnakes, quiet as doves. --William Faulkner
**Prepositional Phrase**
In September of the first year, something extraordinary fell upon Emma’s life; she was invited by the Marquis d’Andervilliers to Vaubyessard. –Gustave Flaubert

By the time I hit the front street, he was already pounding toward the corner, elbows pumping, gun drawn. --Sue Grafton

On the far side of the Ford, I caught sight of him, dragging himself along the sidewalk, blood streaming down the left side of his face from a head wound.--Sue Grafton

Like every great river and every great sea, the moon belongs to one and belongs to all. It still holds the key to madness, still controls the tides that lap on shores everywhere, still guards the lovers that kiss in every land under no banner but the sky. --E.B. White

**Present Participial Phrase**
Avoiding each other's eyes, the awkward young couple sat stiffly apart on the winter-wet park bench, careful not to touch shoulders. --Pamela Gray

Bending double, I made my careful way along behind a screen of elderberry bushes. –Richard Peck

**Past Participial Phrase**
Disappointed that his clumsiness had frightened the heron away, Wil watched it leave. –Gary Paulsen

Dressed up in white flannels, I went over to his lawn a little after seven and wandered around rather ill at ease among swirls and eddies of people I didn’t know. –F. Scott Fitzgerald

Gripped by fear, she peered into the depthless black. –Terry Brooks

**Absolute Phrase**
His cheek pressed to the wet ground, his breath coming in thin whistles, he collapsed onto his side. --Michael Crichton

Arms outstretched, legs apart, Junior stood on top of the barn. –Betsy Byars

**Infinitive Phrase**
To find out, I would have to hang around, and boys are modest to a fault, so I lit out like a jackrabbit. –Richard Peck

To impress Daisy, he took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. –F. Scott Fitzgerald

**Appositive Phrase**
A fat, fertile stretch of farmland dotted with small clumps of trees and pockets of spring water, the Sarandanon was the breadbasket of the Elven nation. –Terry Brooks
The façade of Fifty-ninth Street, a block of delicate pale light beamed down into the park.
–F. Scott Fitzgerald

**Adverb Clause**
As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I fell to sleep, and as I slept, I dreamed a Dream.
–John Bunyan

When I came downstairs in the morning, fresh from a dreamless sleep, I could tell there still was something on Father’s mind. –Ivan Doig

**Coordinating Conjunction/Transitional Expression**
And whenever a pretty-skinned beauty leaned on Duke's piano, he played his best music, compositions smoother than a hairdo sleeked with pomade. --Andrea Davis Pinkney

Of course, soap-on-a-rope is not the only gift that can depress a father on Father’s Day: there are many others, like hedge cutters, weed trimmers, and plumbing snakes. –Bill Cosby

And then, suddenly, in the very dead of the night, there came a sound to my ears, clear, resonant, and unmistakable. –Arthur Conan Doyle (This sentence also uses adjectives shifted out of order)

**Periodic Sentence**
Rising at him from the darkling blue, slowly, smoothly, came the shark. --Peter Benchley

By the time they were more or less dressed and had spilled out onto the stairs to take a grandstand seat with me, here came the customary brisk knock. –Ivan Doig

**Traditional with a Creative Pattern Twist**
He rode a bicycle to school, leaning forward and squinting, wrinkling his nose to nudge his glasses into place. --Lois Lowry

She remembered the earlier, happier times: Mrs. Rosen, her hair neatly combed and covered, lighting the Sabbath candles, saying the ancient prayer. --Lois Lowry

Mrs. Delahanty watched her husband eat, nibbling up to the edges of the toast, then stacking the crusts about his tea cup in a neat fence-like arrangement. --Jessamyn West

She came among them behind the man, gaunt in the gray shapeless garment and the sunbonnet, wearing stained canvas gymnasium shoes. --William Faulkner

I could smell Mama, crisp and starched, plumping my pillow, and the cool muslin pillowcase touched both my ears as the back of my head sank into all those feathers. –Robert Newton Peck