

Sentence length and variety

This material is adapted from *English Solutions for Engineering Research Writing* <http://www.hanyangowl.org>

3.10.1 Sentence length

Generally, when writing engineering papers, the average sentence length of a paragraph should be around 24 words. If your average number of words per sentence is above 25, your writing style might be hard to read. If you have an average of less than 17, your writing style probably needs longer more complex sentences: sentences with a main and a dependant clause joined by a subordinator such as “although, whenever, or because.”

However, it also depends on the type of writing you are doing. If you are writing a user manual, then an average of about 17 is probably standard. If you are writing a business report or a proposal for a general audience, then an average of around 20 words is probably fine. Research writing, especially in the social sciences and humanities, tends to have a longer average number of words per sentence than writing for a general audience. If you are writing for a company newsletter or a user manual then the average sentence length should be shorter than for a research article. Unless it is a long list, consider revising any sentence over about 35 words, which is generally considered too long.

TOOLS (도구) → Word Count (단어 개수) in the MS WORD menu will count the number of words for any highlighted text or entire document. Remember not to count the references and figures at the end of a paper when doing a word count.

TIP

When writing flows well, one of the most important reasons is that it has a variety of sentence lengths and types of sentence.

3.11. Variety of sentence types and lengths

1) Sentence type

TASK

Analyze a long paragraph of your writing. Color or use the highlighter function to color each different type of sentence in your paragraph: Simple, Yellow; Compound, blue; Complex, Green; Compound-complex, pink. You can do this on paper or on the computer

Then analyze a paragraph from the introduction or discussion section of a published journal article and then compare a paragraph of your own writing with it. A well-written paragraph should be a colorful mix, but not too much pink! However, these are general guidelines. You may find some paragraphs in published papers that are not necessarily easy to read. You may also find that methods or experimental sections are more likely to have shorter simple sentences and a smaller average sentence size. Remember that you can copy and paste from most PDF files. How to do this is explained in Chapter 2.

2) Sentence length

TASK

Use the “WORD COUNT” function in MS WORD to count the average number of words in each sentence of a paragraph. Highlight a sentence and then use the word count function. It will then only count that sentence. Then take a color pencil or highlighter or write in your WORD DOCUMENT and analyze a single paragraph of your writing by looking at the length by counting the number of words: short (under 15), medium (15-24), or long (25+ words). Write down the number at the end of the sentence. Is there variety? What is the average length?

TASK

Do the same exercise on a paragraph from a published article that seems to read very well. See what the difference is.

Here is an example from an engineering article that has an average of 22 words. Your writing should have a variety of sentence structures: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex like the following example.

EXAMPLE

When video signals are compressed and transmitted over unreliable channels, some strategy for error control or concealment must be employed.(20 words complex) Possible strategies include forward error correction added at the encoder, post-processing methods employed by the decoder, and interactive requests for repeated data, involving both encoder and decoder.(27 words simple) In this paper, we are concerned with post-processing methods [that are] employed by the decoder.(13 words complex) We consider the single-layer case where coding modes, motion vectors, quantized DCT coefficients, and other information about macroblocks are all sent with the same priority.(25 words complex) When errors strike the bitstream, we assume the decoder loses all information about that slice up to the next resynchronization point.(21 words complex) In the absence of block interleaving, a horizontal swath of macroblocks is missing, and the decoder’s post-processing methods must conceal this from the viewer.(24 words compound) Source: Cen and Cosman: IEEE Transactions on multimedia, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 1 © IEEE 2003

Notice that the type of sentence structure and the word length are not necessarily related. A simple sentence can be longer than a complex sentence because it contains a list or a number of prepositional phrases, for example. Here is a simple example to show this point.

EXAMPLE

Complex sentence: I bought a new CD player when I was shopping yesterday.

Simple sentence: On Saturday, I bought my favorite singer’s latest CD at the music store in COEX mall.

Here is a review of the English sentence structure.

3.2. Four types of sentences

3.2.1 Simple sentence (단문)

A simple sentence has **one independent clause**.

EXAMPLE

The membrane blocks electrons.

3.2.2 Compound sentence (중문)

A compound sentence has **two main (independent) clauses** joined by a

1. coordinator
2. conjunctive adverb or a
3. semicolon.

EXAMPLES

1) Coordinator

main clause	, coordinator	main clause
A battery stores chemicals inside	, and	converts them into electricity.

2) Conjunctive adverb

main clause	; conjunctive adverb,	main clause
The proposed method is cost-effective	; however,	there is some loss in quality.

3) Semicolon

main clause	;	main clause
The hybrid method is not acceptable	;	the loss of power is too great.

3.2.3 Complex sentence (복문)

A complex sentence has **one independent and one (or more) dependent clauses**. There are three kinds of subordinate clauses:

0. adverb clause
1. adjective clause and
2. noun clause

In an adverb clause, the subordinate clause can be either in the beginning or end of the sentence. The punctuation depends on the placing of the dependent clause(s).

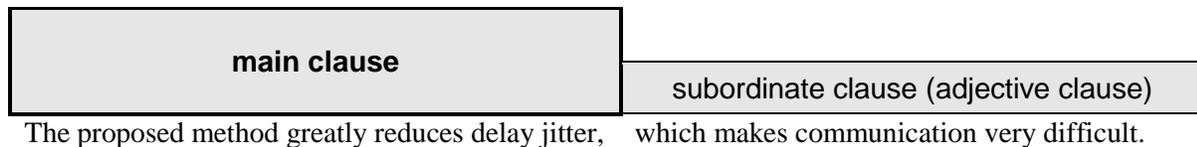
EXAMPLES

1) Adverb clause

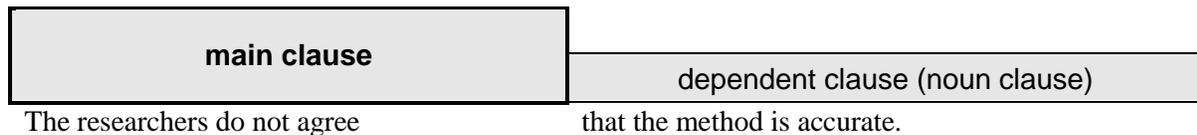
subordinate clause (adverb clause),	main clause
Because it offers a means of making power more efficiently with less pollution,	the technology is extremely promising.

main clause	subordinate clause (adverb clause)
The technology is extremely promising	because it offers a means of making power more efficiently with less pollution.

2) Adjective (relative) clause



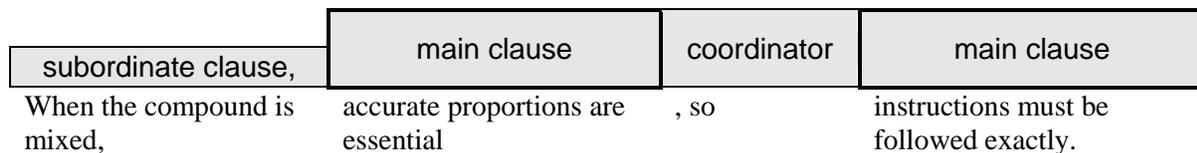
3) Noun clause



3.2.4 Compound-complex sentence (혼합문)

A compound-complex sentence is a **combination structure that has two independent clauses and one (or more) dependent clauses.**

EXAMPLE



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