

Smoothing It Out: Inserting Modifiers

Reading a series of short, bland sentences can be like watching the same movie scene over and over again: a boring experience that threatens to lull you to sleep. To make sentences more vivid and interesting, writers often combine two or more of them by inserting single words and phrases. Read the following examples.

The American Romantics looked to the country. They found peace there. It was in the quiet ponds. It was in the brooks. In these places, Nature talked. It spoke in gentle breezes.

These short, choppy sentences are unnecessarily repetitive, but they contain some vivid modifiers. Here's what might result if they were combined into one longer sentence.

The American Romantics found peace in the quiet ponds and brooks of the country, places where Nature spoke in gentle breezes.

There are several ways to combine sentences by using single-word and -phrase modifiers. The following chart gives examples of some of these methods.

| Methods of Combining Sentences with Single Words and Phrases | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Single-Word Modifiers | |
| ORIGINAL | Rip Van Winkle took along his dog, Wolf, whenever he went hunting. Wolf was very loyal. |
| COMBINED | Rip Van Winkle took along his loyal dog, Wolf, whenever he went hunting. [<i>adjective</i>] |
| ORIGINAL | Diedrich Knickerbocker researched the Dutch history of the area. He carefully researched this history. |
| COMBINED | Diedrich Knickerbocker carefully researched the Dutch history of the area. [<i>adverb</i>] |
| Phrases | |
| ORIGINAL | "Thanatopsis" focuses on the organic cycle of death and renewal. It was written by William Cullen Bryant. |
| COMBINED | "Thanatopsis," by William Cullen Bryant , focuses on the organic cycle of death and renewal. [<i>prepositional phrase</i>] |
| ORIGINAL | Derek Walcott also evokes the subject of death. He writes about sea canes. |
| COMBINED | Writing about sea canes , Derek Walcott also evokes the subject of death. [<i>participial phrase</i>] |
| ORIGINAL | Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was one of America's most popular poets. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow taught at Harvard. |
| COMBINED | One of America's most popular poets , Henry Wadsworth Longfellow taught at Harvard. [<i>appositive phrase</i>] |

Exercise Combining Sentences by Inserting Single Words and Phrases

Combine each of the following groups of sentences, using the part of speech or type of phrase indicated in brackets. You may add or delete words or change word forms. Add commas as necessary.

1. The American Romantics wrote about the thoughts that nature inspired. Nature gave them quiet thoughts. *[adjective]* _____

2. Writers such as Whittier wrote about the past. They wrote nostalgically. *[adverb]*

3. Nature inspired people from the country. It inspired those from the city. The Romantics knew that nature inspired both groups of people. *[prepositional phrases]* _____

4. William Cullen Bryant recognized the guiding hand of nature. He saw it in the flight of waterfowl. It was also in the lives of people. *[prepositional phrases]* _____

5. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that nature had shaped both the human soul and a spiral shell. The shell belonged to a sea creature called a nautilus. *[prepositional phrase]*

6. Romantic writers believed that their heroes did not have to be educated. Their heroes were noble. They were generous. *[adjectives]* _____

7. Longfellow wrote about traditional values. He alluded to this subject in a poem called "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls." He touched on a theme that appealed to an audience hungry for moral lessons. *[participial phrase, prepositional phrase]* _____

8. Holmes was a physician. He was also a descendant of Anne Bradstreet. He was one of the founders of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine. *[appositive phrase]* _____

9. Holmes was a poet. He wrote a poem about the process of change. He used an extended metaphor to convey his message. *[appositive phrase, participial phrase]* _____

10. The American Romantic poets explored a range of themes. They often wrote about nature. The forms they used were generally conventional. *[participial phrase, prepositional phrase]*

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Language Workshop Answer Key

Collection 3: The American Dream, page 48

(Responses will vary. Sample responses follow.)

1. Thomas Jefferson was a talented writer and an influential political leader.
2. Americans did not want to be taxed excessively or treated unfairly.
3. American colonists had hoped the British would be just, but the colonists were disappointed.
4. The British plundered the colonists' towns, camped in their homes, and taxed the colonists extravagantly.
5. You can read the Declaration of Independence to understand the founding principles of the United States government or to observe the persuasive abilities of Thomas Jefferson.
6. In recent times, oppressed people have quoted the Declaration of Independence, for the document inspires those who fight for freedom.
7. Americans wanted to achieve self-rule and unite in a federation.
8. Thomas Jefferson was highly respected by his fellow representatives, so he was asked to write the Declaration of Independence.

Collection 4: The Transforming Imagination, page 50

(Responses may vary. Sample responses follow.)

1. The American Romantics wrote about the quiet thoughts that nature inspired.
2. Writers such as Whittier wrote nostalgically about the past.
3. The Romantics knew that nature inspired people from the country and from the city.
4. William Cullen Bryant recognized the guiding hand of nature in the flight of waterfowl as well as in the lives of people.
5. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote that nature had shaped both the human soul and the spiral shell of the nautilus.
6. Romantic writers believed that heroes did not have to be educated; they should, however, be both noble and generous.
7. Writing about traditional values in a poem called "The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls," Longfellow touched on a theme that appealed to an audience hungry for moral lessons.
8. A physician and a descendant of Anne Bradstreet, Holmes was also one of the founders of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine.
9. A poet, Holmes wrote a poem about the process of change, using an extended metaphor to convey his message.

10. Exploring a range of themes, the American Romantic poets often wrote about nature in conventional forms.

Collection 6: The Realms of Darkness, page 52

(Responses will vary. Sample responses follow.)

1. Elizabeth believes that couples should share their intimate thoughts and tell each other the truth.
2. Moby-Dick is the sailors' quarry, the captain's obsession, and the book's main symbol.
3. The narrator's ability to help Roderick is compromised by Roderick's inability to think clearly.
4. Mr. Hooper is a minister, a bachelor, and a mysterious man.
5. The challenge Ishmael faces is to obey his captain yet trust his own instincts.
6. The narrator wants to help Roderick, to help Roderick's sister, Madeline, and to solve the mystery of the House of Usher.
7. For Mr. Hooper, redemption requires being self-sacrificing and taking his secret to the grave.
8. Roderick suffers from nervous agitation and does not understand why he is ill.
9. Mr. Hooper's duties include speaking at funerals, officiating at weddings, and consoling the dying.
10. Starbuck tells Ahab that pursuing Moby-Dick is dangerous, mad, and blasphemous.

Collection 8: Tell It Slant, page 54

Exercise A

1. subject-verb
2. verbal phrase
3. subject-verb
4. modifiers
5. prepositional phrase

Exercise B

(Revisions will vary. Sample revisions follow.)

1. When it is rich and honest, poetry enhances our lives.
2. To remain faithful to Dickinson's original work, Thomas H. Johnson made fewer changes to her manuscript than did her other editors.
3. Innovative and bold, Whitman and Dickinson were able to create distinctive new poetic forms.