

Adding Power to a Memoir with Sentence Variety

LEADS: STACKING DETAILS TO GET STARTED

Take a close look at your first few sentences. Here are two different ways to grab a reader's attention with sentence variety.

Jo Ann Beard, from *The Boys of My Youth*

Three sentences (2 fragments and 1 complete sentence)

The family vacation. Heat, flies, sand, and dirt. My mother sweeps and complains; my father forever bats hooks and untangles lines.

One long compound sentence (a series of prepositional phrases adds details about each person)

My grandmother married a guy named Ralph about a year and half after Pokey; my real grandfather died of a stroke in the upstairs bedroom of Uncle Rex's house.

Your Turn: Revise your lead by stacking details about the setting and or/the people in the event of the memoir.

- Identify and highlight your original lead in your memoir.
- Write a revised lead somewhere on your draft using the three sentence model above. Label it as "Revised Lead #1."
- Write a second revised lead using the one long compound sentence model above. Label it as "Revised Lead #2."

ENDINGS: SAYING SOMETHING MEANINGFUL

Now look at your last few sentences. Here are two different ways to end a memoir.

Richard Wright, from *Black Boy*

One long compound-complex sentence (includes parallel structure to emphasize his determination to be heard)

I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.

Wes Moore, from *The Other Wes Moore*

Three sentences (two long, the last one shorter to call us to action)

As I wrote at the outset of this book: The chilling truth is that Wes's story could have been mine; the tragedy is that my story could have been his. My only wish--and I know Wes feels the same--is that the boys (and girls) who come after us will know this freedom. It's up to us, all of us, to make a way for them.

Your Turn: Revise your ending by saying something meaningful about yourself or how you see the world.

- Identify and highlight your original ending in your memoir.
- Write a revised ending somewhere on your draft. Label it as "Revised Ending #1."
- Write a second revised ending. Label it as "Revised Ending #2."

Rules for Punctuating Dialogue

1. QUOTATION MARKS: Use quotation marks to enclose the exact words **SPOKEN** by a person.

SPOKEN—Exact words spoken aloud by a person

James said, “This is the slowest bus on earth.”

THOUGHT

James thought this is the slowest bus in the world.

2. CAPITALS: The first word of a direct quote (spoken words) is capitalized.

Marme said, “I want to see the house on the corner of First and Northfield Drive.”

If the direct quote is divided into two parts, do not capitalize the first word of the second part.

“I want to see the new house on the corner,” Marme said, “of First and Northfield Drive.”

If the direct quote is divided into two parts, capitalize it if the second part is a new sentence.

“I want to see the new house on the corner,” Marme said. “It is next to the orange house.”

3. PUNCTUATION: Periods, commas, and question marks are generally placed inside the quotation marks if they are part of the quote.

“The hike should have taken an hour, but the fog slowed us down,” Frannie said.

Frannie said, “The hike should have taken an hour, but the fog slowed us down.”

“Be very careful when you drive through town!” William said.

“What do you want me to do when I am finished painting?” Alex asked.

4. INDENTATIONS: When you write dialogue, begin a paragraph every time the speaker changes.

“Will you pass the salt?” Meranda asked.

“Where is it?” Mother said when she realized she could not see the salt shaker that was hidden behind the bowl of potatoes.

“Over by you,” said Meranda.

“Where do you see it?” Mother said, “I can’t see it.” She craned her neck and leaned out looking for it, but until she stood up, she did not see it behind the bowl.

Decisions for Tagging Dialogue

1. SPEAKER TAGS: Dialogue usually has tags that tell a reader who said the words.

I said, “Give me the five dollars you owe me.”

“What?” Brad said. “I don’t owe you five bucks.”

“Don’t do this. You always try to get out paying me back.” I said.

"Hey! I am not trying to do anything. I don't owe you any money," Brad said, "and you have a lot of nerve saying that I never pay my debts."

2. NO TAGS: Sometimes writers do not use speaker tags. However, they clearly set up who the speakers are in the conversation and carefully use indentations to help a reader know when the speakers change.

Fiona stepped forward and looked straight at Brad. "Give me the five dollars you owe me."

"What? I don't owe you five bucks."

"Don't do this. You always try to get out paying me back."

"Hey! I am not trying to do anything. I don't owe you any money, and you have a lot of nerve saying that I never pay my debts."

3. ACTION TAGS: Sometimes writers use actions to tag the words spoken.

I stepped forward and looked straight at Brad. "Give me the five dollars you owe me."

"What? I don't owe you five bucks." Brad took a step back and looked away, but I stepped in closer, lowered my voice, and gently put my hand on his arm.

"Don't do this. You always try to get out of paying me back."

"Hey!" Brad pulled his arm away and stepped back again. "I am not trying to do anything. I don't owe you any money, and you have a lot of nerve saying that I never pay my debts."

SHOW THE CONVERSATION. (And a note on *said*: Generally, writers use *said* or *asked* rather than searching for 100 synonyms, such as *inquired*, or *mumbled*. They do this because they want the dialogue to do the work. They put all their energy into writing "real" talk that captures the person's attitude and mannerisms. They may indicate volume with *whispered* or *shouted*. But generally they add actions or description to show the conversation.

It was going to be unpleasant. I knew it. I should know better than to lend money, but this time was going to be different. I was different.

I stepped forward and looked straight at Brad. "You owe me five bucks. I need it back."

"What? I don't owe you a thing." Brad took a step back and looked away, but I stepped in closer, lowered my voice and gently put my hand on his arm.

"Don't do this. You always do this." I paused. I could feel myself losing confidence. "Try to get out of paying me back. I need the money. If not today, tomorrow."

"Hey!" Brad pulled his arm away. "I am not trying anything." He stepped back another step and turned before he said, "I don't owe you and you've got a lot of nerve."