

Left- and Right-Handed Sentences

Typical of many types of good English is the striving to create variety in sentence patterns, the avoidance of monotony. This can be illustrated by means of two alternative beginnings to a brief biographical entry for Marilyn Monroe:

A. Marilyn Monroe was born in Los Angeles on June 1, 1926. She was the illegitimate daughter of a depressive mother. Her early life was passed in various foster homes. She was selected as a model by an army photographer in 1944 and became a forced pin-up overnight. She won a Twentieth Century Fox contract in 1946, but until the mid-50s her film appearances were restricted to minor roles. She was complex, driven, demanding, self-absorbed, and an early convert to the dubious pleasures of psychoanalysis. She ceaselessly revealed, reinvented and deconstructed herself at interviews and soon came to exercise a hypnotic fascination over a whole generation of Americans.

B. Born in Los Angeles on June 1, 1926, the illegitimate daughter of a depressive mother, Marilyn Monroe's early life was passed in various foster homes. Selected as a model by an army photographer in 1944 and becoming a forced pin-up overnight, she won a Twentieth Century Fox contract in 1946, but until the mid-50s her film appearances were restricted to minor roles. Complex, driven, demanding, self-absorbed, and an early convert to the dubious pleasures of psychoanalysis, she ceaselessly revealed, reinvented and deconstructed herself at interviews, soon exercising a hypnotic fascination over a whole generation of Americans.

In **Passage A** every single sentence begins with the subject of the main verb, thereby creating an impression of monotony and failing to capture the attention of the reader.

In **Passage B**, by contrast, no sentence begins with the subject. In the first sentence the subject is preceded by a participial clause (*Born...*) and an appositional phrase (*the illegitimate daughter...*). In

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the third sentence the subject is preceded by a series of adjectives (*Complex, driven, demanding...*) and a phrase (*an early convert...*) in apposition, while the main verb is actually followed by a participial clause as well (*soon exercising...*).

This variation in word-order is a crucial technique for avoiding sentence monotony, and its importance can hardly be overestimated. It is favoured by many writers of English — and especially by journalists, reviewers, biographers, and translators of literature. Here are a few more such sentences, which are sometimes referred to as 'left-handed':

1. A semi-secret network, the Broederbund considers itself responsible for maintaining the interests of the tribe. (*Instead of:* The Broederbund, which is a semi-secret network, considers itself responsible for...)
2. A lonely figure, he was compelled to react in the gloom of the 30s to the political situation. (*Instead of:* He was a lonely figure and he was compelled to react in the gloom...)
3. Fiercely clan-ridden and individualistic, that nation has always thwarted any encroachments on its collective independence. (*Instead of:* Since it is fiercely clan-ridden and individualistic, that nation...)

Suggested Exercises (12):

Rewrite the following sentences using similar syntactical patterns:

1. They are the first sectarian killings this year. They highlight the increased activity of the Protestants in recent months.
2. The new clerk was hard-working and reliable; within a short time he had made himself indispensable.
3. Gowen is a former Springbok captain; he has received many international awards for rugby.
4. He was a corpulent man with a short black moustache; he was wearing what appeared to be an old military uniform.
5. These groups were jealous of their traditional prerogatives and implacably hostile to any change. They were organised in a supreme council known as the Congress.
6. He was a solitary man; he was a retired chemist for a large mining company; he had no relations in South Africa.

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7. Elizabeth Regina, who is more a monarch than a mother, continues to reign and shine.
8. He was a democrat of the Left and kept a tactical distance from the Communists.
9. She was petty and vindictive, and soon made a bad reputation for herself.
10. Panama, which was weaker and poorer, was defending itself fiercely.
11. I was hungry for knowledge. I was occasionally able to lay my hands on other publications.
12. They were cousins. They were both from failed marriages. They were polar opposites in temperament but equally fragile in character. They conspired in their own destruction.
13. Slovenia was once the scene of Turkish raids, peasant revolts, and religious persecution. It underwent rapid economic development in the nineteenth century.
14. Lumbumba was a politician of vibrant energy and charismatic powers. He was also abrasive and unstable.
15. Oliver Scott was himself a Vietnam war-veteran. He spares us no details in portraying the full horrors of that conflict.
16. He was almost mad with fear; he tried to reason with his captors.
17. He was anxious to appear the peace-broker, and relished every possibility of mediating between the two sides.
18. He was an admirer of Hitler, and was constantly on the look-out for Nazi paraphernalia.
19. Yeltsin was an old hand in the Kremlin: he was used to such tactics.
20. Jagger was never one to turn down a free meal. He bore Dribberg's company through long lunches at the Ritz.
21. The \$87 million structure is cozily small and acoustically excellent, though it will not be to every taste.
22. Mrs Castle has been traditionally at the left of the Labour Party; she has always been that party's conscience.
23. Andrew was frequently away on military duty. He began turning Fergie into a grass-widow.
24. He sat there impassively, ashen faced, and purse-lipped; he was an old man close to tears.

So far we have examined left-handed sentences which consist of nouns and/or adjectives in apposition to the subject. One special variety, however, exists which deserves attention. If we go back to **Passage B** of the Monroe-biography and study the first sentence, we