Book II.

SENTENCES TO CHOOSE

Chapter I.

LONG OR SHORT SENTENCES

Some writers prefer long to short sentences, others short to long ones; but it is far more important that sentences should be skilfully constructed than that they should be of a certain length.

A sentence that conforms to the English idiom, and that presents a single idea with perfect clearness, is practically shorter than one that contains fewer words, but that is heterogeneous in substance and obscure or confused in form. That which lacks correctness, clearness, and unity is understood, if understood at all, with difficulty, and it may require a second reading; that which has clearness and unity is understood at once. A sentence conspicuous for force or for ease is practically shorter than one of apparently the same length which is feeble or clumsy in expression. Force, by stimulating the attention, and ease, by diminishing the strain on the attention, enable a reader to get at the meaning without wasting time on words that signify nothing, or on sounds that jar on the ear or offend the taste.

If, then, a sentence possesses the five merits of correctness, clearness, force, ease, and unity, its length if not excessive matters little. For example —

Try again.
Haste makes waste.
Whatever is, is right.
Our antagonist is our helper.
There 's no such word as "fail."
The pen is mightier than the sword.
When bad men conspire, good men must combine.
The church door was open, and I stepped in.
So the prince, for all his cleverness, was not happy.
A few rough logs, laid side by side, served for a bridge over this stream.

One would think that in personifying itself a nation would be apt to picture something grand, heroic, and imposing, but it is characteristic of the peculiar humor of the English, and of their love for what is blunt, comic, and familiar, that they have embodied their national oddities in the figure of a sturdy, corpulent old fellow, with a three-cornered hat, red waistcoat, leather breeches, and stout oaken cudgel.

Although the last sentence, which comes from Washington Irving, contains precisely the same number of words — sixty-nine — as the ten sentences before it taken together, it is so arranged that a reader of ordinary intelligence, far from being incommoded by its length, goes with ease and speed from word to word and from clause to clause.

Mingled with the more headlong and half-drunken crowd there were some sharp-visaged men who loved the irrationality of riots for something else than its own sake, and who at present were not so much the richer as they desired to be, for the pains they had taken in coming to the Treby election, induced by certain prognostics gathered at Duffield on the nomination-day that there might be the conditions favorable to that confusion which was always a harvest-time.

Though this sentence from George Eliot contains only nine more words than that quoted from Irving, it is much more difficult to follow. The difficulty lies partly in the fact that the main assertion in the sentence — the assertion that in the crowd were men who had come for the purpose of thieving — is not plainly expressed. Another difficulty lies in the unwieldiness of the last part of the sentence, beginning with the word "induced."

I cannot, from observation, form any decided opinion as to the extent in which this strange delight in nature influences the hearts of young persons in general; and, in stating what has passed in my own mind, I do not mean to draw any positive conclusion as to the nature of the feeling in other children; but the inquiry is clearly one in which personal experience is the only safe ground to go upon, though a narrow one; and I will make no excuse for talking about myself with reference to this subject, because, though there is much egotism in the world, it is often the last thing a man thinks of doing, — and, though there is much work to be done in the world, it is often the best thing a man can do, — to tell the exact truth about the movements of his own mind; and there is this farther reason, that whatever other faculties I may or may not possess, this gift of taking pleasure in landscape I assuredly possess in a greater degree than most men; it having been the ruling passion of my life, and the reason for the choice of its field of labor.

In the first part of this sentence — extending through "a narrow one" — the author (Mr. Ruskin) says that, though it would be unsafe to generalize from his own experience, "personal experience is the only safe ground to go upon." In the second part — extending through "his own mind" — the author says that he will make no excuse for talking about himself, because often the best thing a man can do is to tell the truth about the working of his own mind. In the third and last part, the author gives as a further reason for talking about himself the fact that he possesses in greater degree than most men the "gift of taking pleasure in landscape." Each of these three parts might — to advantage, perhaps — have formed a separate sentence; but clearness of thought, and simplicity of language make the sentence, in its present form, as easy to follow as a sen-

tence of two hundred words can be. Sentences of this length are rare in modern English, and it is only a master of expression who can safely indulge in them.

There is danger in making sentences very long; but there is also danger in making them very short. It will never do to base a general rule on a remark attributed to the late Dr. Freeman. The story runs that during that distinguished historian's visit to this country a few years ago, he happened to go into a college class-room while an exercise in English composition was going on. The teacher was laboriously endeavoring to make a young woman understand how to make her English clearer and more forcible. "Tell her," broke in Dr. Freeman, who was not the most patient of men, — "tell her to write short sentences."

In the case in hand, Dr. Freeman's advice may have been the best possible. It is certainly the best for girls, or boys, at a certain stage of development, when their besetting sin is an addiction to long sentences, — a sin often caused by obscurity or confusion of thought, and usually accompanied by sins against clearness, force, ease, or unity, one or all. This stage is, however, not uncommonly followed by another, in which short sentences abound to such an extent that the reader is disposed to echo the exclamation of a character in the Earl of Beaconsfield's "Endymion," — "I hate short sentences, like a dog barking."

Advantages of a **Long Sentence.** — An idea which is so simple in itself and so simply expressed that a reader of ordinary intelligence can grasp it at once, should, as a rule, be put into one moderately long sentence, not scattered through several short sentences.[1] Several short sentences give the idea in pieces which the reader has to put together; one long sentence gives it as a whole.

[1] See page 285.

I.

And now Londonderry was left destitute of all military and of all civil government. No man in the town had a right to command any other: the defences were weak: the provisions were scanty: an incensed tyrant and a great army were at the gates. But within was that which has often, in desperate extremities, retrieved the fallen fortunes of nations.

II.

And now Londonderry was left destitute of all military and of all civil government. No man in the town had a right to command any other. The defences were weak. The provisions were scanty. An incensed tyrant and a great army were at the gates. But within was that which has often, in desperate extremities, retrieved the fallen fortunes of nations.

In the passage under I., which comes from Macaulay, the second sentence is obviously more effective than the four short sentences which take its place in the passage under II. By putting the four statements into one sentence, the author shows that they are more closely connected with one another than with the sentence which precedes or with that which follows. The difference between the two ways of saying the same thing is merely a matter of punctuation; but it is an important difference.

I.

The lugger was ready in the river; the wind was steady from the east; the weather promised well, and Blake hurried him on board.

II.

The lugger was ready in the river. The wind was steady from the East. The weather promised well and Blake hurried him on board.

The three sentences under II. seem to stand apart from one another. By making them one sentence in form, we show that they are one in substance.

I.

Like all the other characters, she is human; but about her is something ennobling.

II.

She is human, and so are all the characters. But about her is something ennobling.

The opposition between the two assertions connected by "but" is brought out more clearly and strongly if both form one sentence.

Other examples are —

I.	II.
Most urge that the present system of education be extended; but they imply, if they do not show clearly, that they are speaking of the public schools only.	Most urge that the present system of education be extended. But they imply, if they do not show clearly, that they speak of the public schools only.
Certain authors should, to some extent, be read by everybody; but everybody should be allowed the privilege of choosing for himself.	Of course there are certain authors that should be read somewhat by everybody. Everybody, however, should be allowed the privilege of choosing for himself.
In a minute we were rounding the point, Edward at the helm; for the "cat" was his, and neither brother ever takes the helm of the other's boat.	In a minute we were rounding the point, Edward at the helm. It was his cat, and neither brother ever takes the helm of the other's boat.
When Lucy heard that Thomas Parker had decided to go to England, either on business or because he could not get along with her father, she felt secretly happy; for she believed that the discord between the two families would now be at an end.	Thomas Parker had decided to go to England, either because he could not get along with Lucy's father, or on business. When she had heard it, she had felt secretly happy, as the discord between the two families would then be at an end.[1]
We find ourselves recurring again and again to the incidents of the foot-ball game at Springfield; for vivid impressions, made in the excitement of great enthusiasm, are lasting.	Vivid impressions, made in the excitement of great enthusiasm, are very lasting. We find ourselves recurring again and again to the incidents of the foot-ball game at Springfield.

[1] See page 271.

I.	II.
Strong and eccentric minds may rise superior to public opinion, as they did at Athens in the fourth and fifth centuries before Christ. Then literature and science flourished; but when those great minds passed away, public opinion conquered individuality.	Strong and eccentric minds may rise superior to public opinion. They did at Athens in the fourth and fifth centuries before Christ. Then literature and science flourished. But at last those great minds passed away and public opinion conquered individuality.

In the foregoing examples, by putting two sentences into one and binding them together with a connective which shows the relation between them, we enable the reader to understand all the facts at a glance.

Advantages of Short Sentences. — An idea which a reader of ordinary intelligence cannot grasp all at once should, as a rule, be expressed in several short sentences rather than in one long sentence. That which is difficult to grasp when presented as a whole — either because the subject is unfamiliar or because the main thought is clouded by qualifications — may be easy to get hold of in parts.

In days when scholars with trained minds and plenty of leisure formed the reading public, authors — *e. g.*, Clarendon and Milton — wrote sentences much longer than authors of our day would think of writing. At the beginning of the eighteenth century there was a marked change; but even in the age of Queen Anne, sentences such as few writers of the present day would print abounded in books intended for general reading. In "Robinson Crusoe," one of the most popular books ever written, Defoe expresses himself in sentences much longer than would be ventured upon by any author of the nineteenth century who was addressing the general public.

I.

I now began to consider that I might yet get a great many things out of the ship which would be useful to me, and particularly some of the rigging and sails, and such other things as might come to land; and I resolved to make another voyage on board the vessel, if possible. As I knew that the first storm that blew must necessarily break her all in pieces, I resolved to set all other things apart, till I got everything out of the ship that I could get. Then I called a council (that is to say, in my thoughts) whether I should take back the raft; but this appeared impracticable. So I resolved to go as before, when the tide was down; and I did so, only that I stripped before I went down from my hut, having nothing on but a checkered shirt and a pair of linen drawers, and a pair of pumps on my feet.

II.

I now began to consider, that I might yet get a great many Things out of the Ship, which would be useful to me, and particularly some of the Rigging, and Sails, and such other Things as might come to Land, and I resolved to make another Voyage on Board the Vessel, if possible; and as I knew that the first Storm that blew must necessarily break her all in Pieces, I resolv'd to set all other Things apart, 'till I got every Thing out of the Ship that I could get; then I call'd a Council, that is to say, in my Thoughts, whether I should take back the Raft, but this appear'd impracticable; so I resolv'd to go as before, when the Tide was down, and I did so, only that I stripp'd before I went from my Hut, having nothing on but a Chequer'd Shirt, and a Pair of Linen Drawers, and a Pair of Pumps on my Feet.

The sentence under II., — one hundred and sixty-two words in all, — which is copied *verbatim* from the first edition of "Robinson Crusoe," is, in length, structure, and the fact that it forms a paragraph by itself, a fair sample of the style of the book in its original form. A modern writer would have put into several sentences, framed somewhat after the fashion of those under I., what Defoe puts into one sentence. Here, as above,[1] the difference between the two forms is largely a matter of punctuation.

[1] See page 289.

I.

The latest attempt to disprove the report is that of Jesse H. Jones, who gives a detailed narrative of the silver-ware episode. He charges a clerk at General Butler's headquarters with forging the General's signature to the orders which confiscated the plate, and with enriching himself with the plunder.

II.

The latest attempt to disprove the report is that of Jesse H. Jones, who gives a detailed narrative of the silver-ware episode, charging a clerk at Gen. Butler's headquarters with forging the general's signature to the orders confiscating the plate and enriching himself with the plunder.

In this example, clearness, force, ease, and unity are promoted by substituting two sentences for one.

Other examples are —

I.

We were three miles from any house in which I could obtain shelter, and I was afraid of catching cold. To make the best of a bad job and, if possible, to keep warm, I started to run those three miles.

Thus, from first to last, in France as in Rome, coins are an index to the changing political and social state of the kingdom and the people. Rising or falling with every rise or fall in civilization, they furnish an eloquent commentary on the national history.

Thus the autumn passed away in literary, athletic, and social pursuits; and at last, after several examinations, Thanksgiving Day

II.

We were three miles from any house where I could obtain shelter so that I was fearful lest I should catch a severe cold, but trying to make the best of it I started to run those three miles and thus keep warm.

Thus from first to last in France, as in Rome the coins, form an index of the changing political and social state of the kingdom and of the people; rising and falling with every rise and fall in their civilization, they afford within themselves an eloquent commentary upon the history of the nation.

Thus the fall past away in studies, boating, and social pursuits; till, after several examinations, Thanksgiving Day came,

I.

came. I was lucky enough to have friends with whom I could spend the day; but others, less fortunate, ate their turkey and cranberries at Memorial Hall.

The American Ethnographical Exhibition, as planned by Professor Putnam, is intended to present a living picture of the actual home life of typical native peoples in different parts of America, from the Arctic regions to the island of Tierra del Fuego. With the co-operation of the United States Indian Office, many tribes of the United States Indians will be represented, and will take their proper place among the native peoples of America.

The brakeman on our car, who was evidently a new hand at the business, had not yet acquired the brusqueness of his trade. He kept going through the car, opening ventilators and windows and shutting blinds whenever he thought he could thereby increase the comfort of the passengers. His thoughtfulness called forth much favorable comment.

I shall merely try to give a short sketch of those features of the social condition of France which have most impressed me. I shall emphasize the wide class distinctions. I shall speak of

II.

when I was lucky enough to have friends with whom I spent the day; while the less fortunate ones ate their turkey and cranberries at Memorial Hall.

The American Ethnographical Exhibition, as planned by Professor Putnam, is intended to present a living picture of the actual home life of typical native peoples in different parts of America from the Arctic regions to the Island of Tierra del Fuego, including many tribes of the United States Indians which will be represented, with the coöperation of the United States Indian office, and take their proper place among the native peoples of America.

The brakeman on our car was evidently a new hand at the business and had not yet acquired the brusqueness of his trade, for he kept going through the car opening ventilators and windows and shutting blinds, whenever he thought the comfort of the passengers could thereby be increased, until he had attracted considerable favorable comment on his thoughtfulness.

I shall merely try to give a short sketch of the chief features of the social condition of France which have most impressed me, emphasizing the wide class distinctions, and showing some of

I.

some of the oppressive and vexatious burdens under which the people struggled.

Its progress must be watched with interest by every student of political science, and by every alert citizen of the United States. To the student of political science it offers a rare opportunity to study the foundation of a new government, and of a new form of government. To the citizen of the United States it is interesting because it shows a people, akin to his own, trying to gain peacefully under the crown what his forefathers a hundred years ago gained by revolt from the crown and by war.

To return to the subject of Mr. Collins and Miss Bennet. When she refuses this prim and conventional lover, it is amusing to see his mingled surprise and wrath. His feeling is so evenly divided between the two that one can hardly tell which is predominant. At last, his anger getting the better of his surprise, with a look of contempt he stalks proudly out of the room.

II.

the oppressive and vexatious burdens under which the people struggled.

Its progress must be watched with interest by every student of political science, for it offers the rare chance of studying the foundation of a new government —and a new form of government; and by every alert citizen of these United States, because he sees a kindred people trying to gain peacefully, under the crown what his forefathers gained a hundred years ago by war and revolt from the crown.

To return to the subject of Mr. Collins and Miss Bennet, it is most amusing when the latter has refused her prim and conventional lover, to see his mingled surprise and wrath, it is so evenly divided that one can hardly tell which is predominant, finally his anger gets the better of his surprise and with a look of utmost contempt he stalks proudly out of the room.

In deciding between LONG *and* SHORT SENTENCES, *a writer should consider both what he has to say, and who his readers are likely to be.*

Chapter II.

PERIODIC OR LOOSE SENTENCES

SENTENCES are either periodic or loose.

I.	II.
From start to finish, the seniors rowed a plucky race.	The seniors rowed a plucky race from start to finish.

This example shows a periodic and a loose sentence side by side. The periodic sentence (given under I.) holds the thought in suspense from the beginning to the end; the loose sentence (given under II.) might, so far as grammatical construction is concerned, end at "race." In other words, the periodic sentence is not a sentence until the end is reached, for till then it does not express a complete thought; the loose sentence would, if it stopped at "race," express a complete thought.

Advantages of the **Periodic Sentence.** — In sentences which are so short and so simple in construction that a reader of ordinary intelligence catches the meaning at once, the periodic form is usually preferable to the loose.

I.	II.
Even in his own mind, he did not dare to form a guess.	He did not dare to form a guess even in his own mind.
Without being told, he brought me two plates of steak.	He brought me two plates of steak without being told.
So far as the spectators were concerned, it was a poor day for the race.	It was a poor day for the race as far as the spectators were concerned.
As the lecture is both long and important, I hope you will come early.	You will come early, I hope, as the lecture is long and important.

I.	II.
The concerts are both pleasing to ordinary hearers and instructive to students of music.	The concerts are pleasing to ordinary hearers as well as instructive to students of music.

In each of these examples, the periodic form (given under I.) is preferable to the loose form (given under II.).

In the last periodic sentence, "both" leads the reader to expect a second phrase beginning with "and;" in the loose sentence, the phrase "as well as instructive to students of music" comes in as an afterthought.

Other examples are —

I.	II.
Lord Tennyson's fancy is not only graceful and humorous, but is always and conspicuously tender.	Lord Tennyson's fancy is always and conspicuously tender, as well as graceful and humorous.
They talk more for the fun of the fray and the joy of contradiction than in order to listen to what may be said on the other side.	They talk for the fun of the fray and the joy of contradiction rather than in order really to listen to what may be said against them.
Though there were ten eggs in the nest, only one chicken was hatched.	There were ten eggs in the nest, but only one chicken was hatched.
Bitter as the moment was to the blood-thirsty old man, the command was one which he dared not disobey.	It was a bitter moment to the blood-thirsty old man, but it was a command he dared not disobey.
Having read in the late eclipse of the moon signs that we should not score in the game with Yale, I did not go to Springfield. As there were only a few men in the great room, the professor omitted his usual lecture.	I had read signs in the late eclipse of the moon that we should not score against Yale, so I did not go to Springfield. There were but a knot of men in the great room, so the professor omitted his usual lecture.

I.

As I didn't know anybody there, I made up my mind that eating would be the most profitable means of killing time.

II.

I didn't know anybody there, so I had come to the conclusion that eating would be the most profitable way of passing the time.

The last two passages as originally written exemplify a way of putting things which is characteristic of unpractised writers. "So" does not unite the two clauses which it appears to connect; it is hardly a stepping-stone from one to the other.

I.

Although we must admit that in athletic contests success has a real value, in that it keeps up an interest in the sports and thus encourages exercise, it is not the sole aim.

II.

Success in athletic contests is not the sole aim sought, although we must admit that it has a real value in keeping up an interest in the sports and so encouraging exercise.

In this example, the periodic is preferable to the loose form, not only because, by suspending the sense, it enables the reader to grasp the meaning of the sentence as a whole, but also because it is so arranged as to lay stress on "not the sole aim," the emphatic words.[1]

Other examples are —

I.

On such a day as this, to spread your chest to the wind, to feel your clothes warm and tight around you, and all the while be unconscious of the weight of arms and legs, is almost inspiring.

II.

It is almost inspiring to spread your chest to the wind on such a day as this, to feel the clothes warm and tight around you and all the while be unconscious of the weight of arms and legs.

[1] See pages 243–248.

I.

The editor of the old school, who worked his way up from the case, and who in early days handled his stick and galley far more correctly than he now does his pen, still regards with aversion the college-bred aspirant for newspaper honors.

II.

The college-bred aspirant for newspaper honors is still regarded with aversion by the editor of the old school, who worked his way up from the case and who handled his stick and galley in his early days far more correctly than he now does his pen.

Long as the last sentence is, the periodic form conveys the meaning more easily than the loose one, — partly because it substitutes an active for a passive verb[1] and a direct for an indirect way of putting things, and partly because it puts the important words in a prominent position.

Advantages of the **Loose Sentence.** — For sentences in which the periodic form would sound affected or declamatory, the loose form is better.

I.

My understanding expanded during this visit to Laxton more than during any other three months of my life.

During this visit to Laxton my understanding expanded more than during any other three months of my life.

I was going rapidly ahead with my physics and my metaphysics alike; upon all lines of advance, in short, that interested my ambition.

II.

Never in any equal number of months had my understanding so much expanded as during this visit to Laxton.[2]

Equally, in fact, as regarded my physics and my metaphysics; in short, upon all lines of advance that interested my ambition, I was going rapidly ahead.[2]

[1] See pages 235–238.

[2] Quoted from De Quincey by WILLIAM MINTO: A Manual of English Prose Literature. Edinburgh: Blackwood & Sons, 1872.

In each of these examples, short as they are, the loose sentence is preferable to the periodic for the simple reason that it follows the natural English order, — the order in which the words would naturally come to an English-speaking person who was thinking more about what he wanted to say than about forms of expression.

Other examples are —

I.

Religion is now under baleful Atheisms, Mammonisms, Joe-Manton Dilettanteisms, with their appropriate Cants and Idolisms.

I am thought an unmannerly boor because I leave these calls unmade.

Those were gone whose faith or whose fanaticism led them to believe themselves soldiers of the Almighty, and who in that dread enlistment feared nothing but to be found unworthy of their calling.

The true principles of contract appear to us to forbid allowing an action to a third party, from whom no consideration moves, and who is in no way privy to the agreement.

Our house is shut in on two sides by a tangled forest, from the coverts of which the quail's note is often heard, and it looks across a level marsh of ever-varying green to the blue waters of the bay beyond.

II.

Under baleful Atheisms, Mammonisms, Joe-Manton Dilettanteisms, with their appropriate Cants and Idolisms — religion now is.

Because I leave these calls unmade, I am thought an unmannerly boor.

Those whose faith or whose fanaticism led them to believe themselves soldiers of the Almighty, and who in that dread enlistment feared nothing but to be found unworthy of their calling, they were gone.[1]

The true principles of contract appear to us to forbid the allowing a third party, from whom no consideration moves and who is in no way privy to the agreement, an action.[2]

Flanked on both sides by tangled forests, from whose coverts the quail's note is often heard and looking across a level marsh, of ever-varying green, to the blue waters of the Bay beyond, stands our house.

[1] See page 222.

[2] See page 205.

These examples are enough to show that the sweeping advice sometimes given to young writers that they should strive to make their sentences periodic may mislead. Other things being equal, it is better so to frame a sentence that the reader shall not think he has finished it till he reaches the end; but other things are not equal if the reader's attention is called from the thought to the peculiarity of the language, or if he has difficulty in following the thought.

As between a PERIODIC *and a* LOOSE *form of* SENTENCE, *that should be chosen which conveys the meaning with least trouble to the reader.*

Chapter III.

PRINCIPLES OF CHOICE

So far as sentences considered by themselves are concerned, no one kind is, as a rule, better than another. In a given case, a good writer will prefer that kind which most closely fits his thought, and is best adapted to his purpose.

In a succession of sentences, a different principle comes in, — the principle of variety. To fill a page with sentences that are of about the same length, or that are fashioned after the same pattern, is a serious error. The best form of writing, if persisted in too long, becomes monotonous; and monotony gradually dulls attention, and in course of time kills interest. The most brilliant style, as every reader of Gibbon or of Junius knows, loses its effect when the brilliancy becomes a steady glare. To good writing, as to a good picture, shade is as important as light. Variety is the spice of life, and the life of style.

PART III.

PARAGRAPHS