



Repetition Lesson 3: Repeated Sentence Beginnings

Welcome to Lesson 3! In the last two lessons, you learned how to avoid word and phrase repetition. Today we're going to focus on Repeated Sentence Beginnings.

What is it?

Repeated sentence beginnings are when many sentences in your manuscript begin the same way—for example, with a character's name, with a pronoun, or with an initial-ING verb.

Why are repeated sentence beginnings a problem?

Reading too many of these in a row can ruin the rhythm of your work.

Here's an example:

She gritted her teeth and followed Alex. **She** sidled up to him and stared into the gaping gully. **She** felt her heart hammering.

The problem with this sequence is that all three of these sentences begin the same way, with the word “she,” followed by a verb. It feels flat.

Good writing has a rhythm, and that rhythm comes from variation. Paragraphs should include sentences of different lengths and styles. To improve your writing, you need to mix up the way you begin your sentences.

How can I fix it?

Like most sentence-level edits, a little creativity can solve your problem quite quickly. Here are some suggestions to try. Remember, you don't have to try to remove every single instance of a repeated sentence beginning. Rely on your ear—listen for the rhythm of the sentence.

1. Add an initial phrase or clause

You can improve the rhythm of your paragraph by inserting an initial phrase or clause before the repeated word to shake up the beginning of the sentence. Here are three possible solutions to our previous example:



ORIGINAL:

She gritted her teeth and followed Alex. She sidled up to him and stared into the gaping gully.

REVISION 1:

She gritted her teeth and followed Alex. Nervous as hell, she sidled up to him and stared into the gaping gully.

REVISION 2:

She gritted her teeth and followed Alex. Wishing she'd never agreed to come with him, she sidled up to him and stared into the gaping gully.

REVISION 3:

She gritted her teeth and followed Alex. Hands damp with sweat, she sidled up to him and stared into the gaping gully.

2. Add some internal reaction to the character's actions

The following paragraph has three sentences in a row that start with "she."

She glanced at the sky. She wanted to climb the mountain. She'd been waiting for this for weeks. But to climb with Alex? That she wasn't sure about.

I solved the repetition by including some internal character reactions to the actions performed:

She glanced at the sky. To her annoyance, the man was right. Not a cloud marred the vivid blue. She wanted to climb the mountain. She'd been waiting for this for weeks. But to climb with Alex? That she wasn't sure about.

In the original version, the character looked at the sky, but we didn't know what she saw. So I included a short description of what she saw (the "reaction"), before continuing with her thoughts. Now the repetitive sentences are broken up and the "she's" are less noticeable.



Here's another example:

ORIGINAL:

She pushed open her door and inhaled the sharp smell of pine. **She** turned toward the back of the truck and gasped at the sight.

To fix the repetitiveness, I added an internal reaction to the first action:

REVISED:

She pushed open her door and inhaled the sharp smell of pine. Her skin prickled at the coolness of the air, so different from the baking dryness of the valley below. She turned toward the back of the truck and gasped at the sight.

A side benefit of breaking up the repetitive action is that we get a richer paragraph. The snippets of description we added give the reader a better sense of the character's experience.

You'll find a similar benefit with a lot of your editing. You might start by trying to fix a "mechanical" problem like repetition of a word or phrase, but your solution will likely add to the quality of your manuscript as well.

3. Make sure you don't start two sentences in a row with an initial –ING verb.

This structure is particularly noticeable to readers and can become very annoying when used too frequently.

For example:

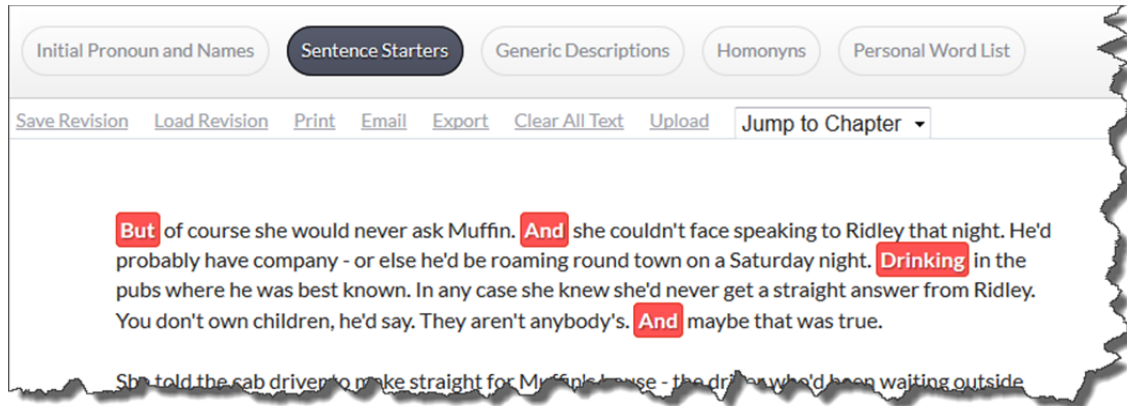
Running down the hall, he sent up a silent prayer that he'd get there in time. **Reaching** for his cell phone, he remembered he'd left it in his car. **Cursing** under his breath, he picked up his pace, aware that he was racing against time.

Here, we have three sentences that start with an initial –ING verb. That means the rhythm of the sentence is all the same. Here's how you could mix it up and add variation and interest:

He raced down the hall, sending up a silent prayer that he'd get there in time. He dug in his pocket for his cell phone. Empty. Cursing under his breath, he picked up his pace. He was racing against time.



How can AutoCrit help?



It can get tedious to look for sentence repetitions on your own. AutoCrit can help through the Sentence Starters and Initial Pronoun and Names Analysis found under the Word Choice Tab. These analysis will automatically highlight sentences that begin with a pronoun, name or -ING verb. That way, you can easily see areas where you need to add a bit more variety to your sentence beginnings.

Next topic: Repetition of Sentence Structure

Until then, happy editing!