# Rhetorical Grammar, Week Six: Varying Sentence Length

# “This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It’s like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety. Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals–sounds that say listen to this, it is important.” –Gary Provost

# As an author, you must make decisions about audience, genre, and subject matter—but you are also constantly making choices about style and grammar. As you can gather from the Gary Provost paragraph above, paying attention to the length of your sentences can be a powerful way to create interest in your readers. Monotony can cause anyone’s attention to stray. Using a variety of sentences, including sentence fragments and questions, can help you keep your reader engaged with what you’re saying.

# Of course, that variety isn’t random. Rhythm is only one component. There’s an intimate connection between the form a sentence takes and the content of that sentence. Content can help you decide if the sentence needs to be ‘special’ in some way, i.e., long enough to call attention to itself, or short enough to make an impact, or a rhetorical question to get your reader thinking. And form can help *create* the meaning of a sentence.

# Macbeth, Act V Scene V:

Wherefore was that cry?

**SEYTON**

The queen, my lord, is dead.

**MACBETH**

She should have died hereafter;  
There would have been a time for such a word.  
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
Signifying nothing.