SENTENCE LENGTH: A Theoretical Overview

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Abstract

Writers usually exert many efforts in writing sentences with the proper length. Some of them stick to short sentences, which can make their writing looks choppy. Others like to write with long sentences, which can make the writing seems long-winded or wordy, even if it is not.

In English language, the length of a sentence refers to how many words are there in that sentence. In almost all formulas, this number is used to estimate how much the sentence is difficult. Still, sometimes, a short sentence shows more difficulty to be read than a long one. Sometimes, longer sentences lead to facilitate comprehension, especially those that contain coordinate structures.

This study discusses the basic grammatical notion of *sentence*, and its length from different points of view. Innumerable definitions of sentence exist and some of these are presented here to get a workable definition to this key term.

A definition of sentence length is also presented. Different treatments of the so called sentence length are to be discussed. The various techniques, that have been devised to deal with the sentence in different types of texts as to get better writings, are accounted for in this study. These points are discussed to reach the end, i.e. the conclusion of good sentence length.

Key Words: Sentence, Sentence Length, Short Sentence, Long Sentence

Introduction

1.1 Problem

Defining the ideal sentence length might cause some hesitation – "How to make my essay look well-balanced?". Sentences, which are too short, might look choppy, lacking, and even empty. At the same time, it is important not to bore the reader with wordiness of long sentences. On the other hand, when a text consists of same-length sentences, it might seem no less boring than the wordy type. This is why it is important to find the balance and stick to the average number of words, while practicing variety.

Sentence length, which seems like a minor issue, might pose a real danger to the quality of a text. The different views of sentence

length need to be assessed to find out what is the optimal length that will make any text easily readable and its components informative.

1.2 Aims

The study aims mainly at presenting a definition of the notion of sentence length and the different treatments found to get better writings.

1.3 Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that:

- 1- The number of words used in a sentence is used to estimate how much the sentence is difficult.
- 2- Sometimes short sentences show more difficulty to be read than long ones.

1.4 Procedures

- 1- A theoretical survey of sentence length is presented.
- 2- A detailed framework is formulated and used as a tool to determine the best average of words used in a sentence.
- 3- A conclusion of the best sentence length is drawn.

1.5 Value

The study intends to clarify the optimal sentence length in different types of texts. It shows how diversity between long and short sentences is important to make any text readable and enjoyable.

The study highlights the balance that should be found in any text to reach better writings.

2.1 The Notion Sentence

Although native speakers of English know intuitively what a sentence is and how to use it, the term sentence has proved to be notoriously difficult to define neatly. Such a fact has induced some linguists to conclude that it is highly unlikely that there will ever be a best definition of a term like sentence. (Crystal, 1971: 200)

Lyons (1968: 173) defines the sentence as "a grammatical unit between the constituent parts of which distributional limitations and dependencies can be established but which can itself be put in to no distributional class."

Similarly, Crystal's Dictionary of linguistics and Phonetics (2003: 414) sees the sentence as "the largest structural unit in terms of which the grammar of a language is organized".

Halliday (1994:215) sees the sentence as a clause complex: a head clause together with the other clauses that modify it. A sentence can also be interpreted as a multivariate constituent structure. In addition, he considers the sentence to have evolved by expansion outwards from the clause.

To avoid the various problems involved in the exact definition of the sentence, the researcher will adopt its orthographic definition as a textual unit, which begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop.

2.2 Components of a Sentence

In linguistics, "a sentence is an expression in natural language, and it is often defined to indicate a grammatical unit consisting of one or more words that generally bear minimal syntactic relation to the words that precede or fellow it . A sentence can include words grouped meaningfully to express a statement, question, exclamation, request or command" (Fowler, 1990: 72)

2.2.1 Clauses

Each clause consists of a subject and a predicate .The subject is of course a noun phrase, though sometimes phrases of other kinds, as for example the gerund phrases, also work. Besides some languages, allow the omitting of the subject. The predicate is a verb phrase: a finite verb with or without objects, with or without complements, and with or without adverbials.

Clauses are of two kinds: independent clauses and subordinate (dependent) clauses. The independent one is that which expresses one thought and this of course should be complete, like "I am sad". A subordinate clause, on the other hand is not of one complete thought. It is not a full sentence: for example, "because I had to move". (ibid: 73)

2.2.2 Complete Sentence

A Complete sentence, of course a simple one, is of one single clause (subject and predicate). Other complete full sentences consist of more than one clause. (ibid).

2.3 Classification of Sentences

Sentences can be classified:

1- By Structure

An old and a traditional way to classify sentences in English is to check the finite clauses and to see their number and their types.

- 1- <u>A simple sentence</u> is the one, which contains a single independent clause and no dependent clauses.
- 2- <u>A compound sentence</u> is the one, which contains multiple independent clauses and no dependent clauses. Conjunctions, punctuations, or both link the clauses.
- 3- <u>A complex sentence</u> is the one, which contains at least one independent clause and a dependent one.
- 4- <u>A complex-compound sentence</u> (or compound-complex sentence) is the one, which contains doubled independent

clauses, one of which has at least one dependent clause (ibid: 74).

2- By Purpose

- 1- <u>A "declarative sentence"</u>, an easy name for "declaration", it is the most known kind, which frequently makes a statement: "I am going home"
- 2- <u>An "interrogative sentence"</u> is to name the "question". The type of sentences which is used frequently to request information-"Where are you going?"
- 3- <u>An "explanative sentence"</u>, a name for "exclamation" is usually with an emphatic tone of statement to express emotion: "What a wonderful day is this!"
- 4- <u>An "imperative sentence"</u>, the one for "commands". It is to tell someone to do something: "Go to work at 7:30 in the morning".(ibid)

2.4 Major and Minor Sentences

A major sentence is one, which has a subject and a predicate, for example: *I have a house*. In this sentence, the subject can be changed: *We have a house*. The minor one, however, does not have a finite verb, as when one says, "*Mary!*" "*Yes.*" "*Coffee.*" etc. Headings, are common examples of this type of sentences (e.g. this entry's heading), expressions like (*Hello!*), (*Wow!*), and proverbs, etc. Nominal sentences like "the more, the merrier" can also be included. These do not have verbs to enhance the meaning around the nouns and are commonly found in poetry and catchphrases. (Leech & Svartvik, 1994: 262)

2.5 Sentence length

Crystal in his Dictionary of linguistics and Phonetics (2003: 263) states that "the notion of physical length has been used in stylistics and studies of grammar and vocabulary in an attempt to quantify variations in the apparent complexity of sentences, words, etc."

The notion of sentence length has been studied in terms of the constituents it may have such as words, morphemes, syllables etc.,.

sentence length will be measured in terms of the number of words in an orthographic sentence i.e. a sentence which begins with a capital letter and ends with some mark of terminal punctuation such as a period, a question mark, or an exclamation mark.

2.5.1 What to remember about sentences?

1. **Strong finishes intensify strong sentences:** Ending like for example "*in many cases*" or "*in all likelihood*" are flat phrases that usually weaken our sentences.

The number of smokers is going to go up, in all likelihood.

To strength this sentence, it can be changed into:

In all likelihood, the number of smokers is only going to go up. (ibid: 265)

Ending a sentence with a perfunctory attribution is another way to weaken it. The sentence is to be stronger if we begin with the attribution.

Sydney farmers think to plant 90,000 acres of Upland cotton this year, up 39% from the acreage seeded in 2009, according to the Australian Department of Agriculture.

According to the Australian Department of Agriculture, Sydney farmers think to plant 90,000 acres of Upland cotton this year, up 39% from the acreage seeded in 2009.

2. **Length and readability of sentences:** To raise readability of the sentences to its maximum, they should range between 20 and 25 word. However, it is important to vary sentence length. Longer sentences are be mixed with shorter ones, and the sentences' structures, also, is to be varied. A comparison of these two versions of the same paragraph can show the difference:

It is unkind to judge the influence of this ad as I have never fed a cat. The spot looks completely crafted, and the animation seems sharp. It absolutely manages to stand out from other pet-food ads on TV. Were I a hep, bohemian cat gazing at this ad from atop my owner's entertainment console, I imagine I would be curious to taste the food those kooky hippies at Friskies are cooking up.

It is unkind for me to judge this ad's efficiency. I have never fed or owned a cat. The spot looks completely crafted. The animation seems sharp. It manages to stand out from other pet-food ads on TV. I imagine I would be curious to taste the food; those kooky hippies at Friskies are cooking up, if I were a hep bohemian cat.

The difference between the two versions may be scarce, but it is the point by which good writers are distinguished from those who are merely functional. (ibid: 267)

2.5.2 Sentence with good length

For most pieces of writing, the suitable average of English sentence length is about 15 to 20 words. An example is presented here, which comes from a textbook on computing, it is with good average sentence length.

The core software is the operating system of a computer. It performs two main important functions. First, it works on the interface

so the user can interact with the machine. Secondly, it manages the resources such as the CPU and main memory. It controls when programs are to be run, where they are loaded into memory, and how hardware devices communicate. It is the role of the operating system to help in making the computer easy to use and guarantee that it runs efficiently'. (Lewis & Loftus, 2001: 3)

The average SL (sentence length) is 14.3 words. Most textbook writers and master editors try to keep an average of 15 to 20 words. This ideal size range is based on the idea of "cutting off" the principles of human memory, and sometimes sentences are to be longer than 20 words. For example, in academic writings we may chance upon sentences of 30 or 35 words. Other will be shorter than 15 words, and these may even be as short as four or five words.

Now we have to count the words in the text to calculate the average sentence length in this text. Then to divide this number by the number of sentences in our text. We can use the following formula.

 $ASL = W \div S$

ASL = Average sentence length

W = number of words in the text

S = number of sentences in the text. (Sweet, 1968: 152)

We should keep our sentences short. A great concentration is demanded from the reader with long sentences. When a sentence is longer than 25 or 30 words, actually it needs a second look. Although, teachers in schools used to encourage us to write with complex and long sentences to ensure our mastery of syntax, shorter sentences are better in business and technical writing. (ibid: 155)

A good way to keep sentences short is by focusing on the idea. Each sentence expresses an idea. If we have two ideas, then we have to use two sentences. A subject-verb-object is typically used to express an idea. If we find our sentence starts and ends with different subjects- verbs- objects, then we almost have to change this sentence into two. (ibid)

Other working rules are to keep the subject-verb-object order, to use fewer words, and to avoid passive verbs, and the result sentences will be easier to understand. One-way which makes the writing deadly and monotonous is when we never vary the length of our sentences. Sticking to short sentences makes any prose sounds choppy, and like a bad imitation of Hemingway. In almost the same way our sentences will be hard to read if, we keep writing with long sentences. (ibid)

However, keeping the move on the all "medium" sentences does not work, either. Monotony is created easily when one sticks to the same length and almost his/her sentences will be grammatically of the same pattern. A longer sentence, like the one being created here, works on offering additional details, to help to focus in, to explain an idea more clearly or--perhaps--to initiate a description and make it powerful. A short sentence gets to the point. (ibid: 156)

The first thing needed to analyze any piece of writing is to reach to the number, which refers to the average of words in a sentence.

- The first step is to take an essay, which is considered normal (because one, which has many dialogues, or loaded with descriptions can deflect the results) and tick off twenty sentences in it.
- The second step is to count the number of words in each sentence and then to add those totals to get a grand total.
- The last thing is to divide the grand total by 20. The result got will be the average number of words per sentence. (ibid: 157)

Yule (1996:77) expresses that although this type of analysis is almost considered weak; but the average sentence length below 14 words per sentence may show that the writer has used short sentences more than it is accepted and he/she needs to know about combination and/or subordinate ideas. On the other hand, if the average is well above 22 words per a sentence, this reflects that the writer may be putting too much freight on his/ her sentences and then the text will have the prose style, which is dense and tangled. In case the average of word length is between 14 and 22, so a look is needed to give some variety to the text so the sentences will not be of same length.

Checking the "rhythm" of our sentences, considering when to use a longer sentence or a shorter one, and when to vary is a "work-in-progress". The effective sentence style does not just happen. For most of us, it takes a lot of work. (ibid)

2.5.3 How to fix 'short' sentences

The two methods to fix short sentences are sentence combining and subordination. A sequence of short sentences can almost be changed by combination into a longer, more effective sentence. (ibid: 79)

2.5.3.1 The strategy of combining sentences

Considering, for example, a paragraph from "Writing with a Purpose" by Joseph Trimmer (1997: 32)

Last week I saw a science fiction film. I went with four friends. The film shown was about a mad doctor, and one of his experiments. It was about modifying the lives of his patients by a kind of manipulation of their dreams.

In the paragraph, above all the short sentences have the same pattern of noun-verb-object, which creates an unsteady effect. In an economical combination of the same short sentences, we can have: Last week, I went with four of my friends to see a science fiction film in which a mad doctor modified his patients' lives by a kind of manipulation of their dreams.

2.5.3.2 The subordination technique

The connection between the ideas in any text can be difficult to catch and understand by any reader when the sentences are short and choppy. One way to correct this is by using subordinating conjunctions, words that show the relationship between clauses and thus the reader will be given a direction to go into. (Fowler, 1990: 79)

Subordinating words include conjunctions like *when, after, because, although,*etc.

Considering the examples that follow:

I lifted the box. My hand terribly hurt. We can see here how a subordinating word plays a good role in linking and showing the connection between the two sentences. By changing the subordinating words, the meaning of the sentence will be changed as well.

After I lifted the box, my hand terribly hurt. Or I lifted the box because my hand terribly hurt. (ibid).

2.5.4 Handling the long, wordy sentences

Certain strategies are used so that the sentences in any text go in a streamline. The strategies are important because longer sentences can be completely effective, and just simple and wordy sentences. These strategies are:

1- To avoid using the passive forms like *is, was, are, were, has, had,* etc... as these constructions create a kind of wordiness.

The letters were sent by the journalist working in the magazine. vs.

The journalist working in the magazine sent the letters. (ibid) 2- To avoid the use of many prepositional phrases:

The school of my little brother. Vs. My little brother's school. (ibid)

3- To eliminate repetition and prune the written sentences, that is not to express the same idea in many different ways, and to omit the unnecessary words, e.g.

in my mind, I decided that ... -- where else are you going to decide something? In someone else's mind? Or phrases like "true fact" (a fact is true), "new innovations," and so forth.

- 4- To reduce the use of words like, it, which, whose, that, those, thing, these, they.
- 5- To avoid the use of what Macrorie (2003: 67) calls "namery" (that is to name things which in fact do not need to be named).

An example from his book "Telling Writing" is presented here to show sentence tightening:

Sandy and Linda are women who fall in love. This is one similarity between these two characters. Their age is different. Sandy is being an impetuous adolescent and Linda is a mature adult. This difference is clear by the way in which the two fall in love. Sandy rushes into romance and gets married as quickly as possible while Linda makes sure of her love for Jack--a much more rational and logical choice than Sandy's.

The previous paragraph is full of Namery. The writer tells that Sandy and Linda fall in love and after that, unnecessarily he tells us that the two are similar. He completely wastes the sentence when he expresses first that they are different in age and after a while, he says that one is adolescent and the other an adult.

Their difference in age is also shown in the ways by which the two characters have fallen in love. The paragraph can be rewritten as half of the original one keeping the intended meaning and the major ideas:

One of the few similarities between Sandy and Linda is that they both fall in love; but Sandy rushes into romance while Linda makes sure of her love for Jack. Sandy is an impetuous adolescent; Linda is a mature adult. (ibid)

2.6 Variety of sentences

To enhance the interest of our readers, intensify the flow of our ideas and sustain the points being talked about in the text, we need to add variety. The variety should cover three areas in our writing: length, rhythm, and structure so to create interest in our writing. (Fowler, 1990: 101)

2.6.1 Short Sentences

A short sentence explicitly presents one idea, but putting too many of them in the text can make the writing looks awkward and simplistic. However, well-placed short sentences after each other can emphasize a point in the text. (ibid)

Here is an example:

Our senator has two houses, one in our state and one in California. Although I understand the reasons for having two homes, owing two \$400,000 residences seems unnecessarily extravagant. In short, I disapprove.

We have to remember that we can connect a series of short repetitive sentences by using conjunctions and semicolons.

Example:

She came; she saw; she won. (ibid)

2.6.2 Medium Sentences

Sentences of medium-length allow space in the text to connect ideas and add details, and of course to remain clear and easy to read.

Sentences of medium-length must form the core of our writing. (ibid: 102)

Example:

Although I enjoy televised wrestle, I am dissatisfied with the network commentaries. All the sportscasters' comments are superficial, pointing out the obvious things-like who is winning-rather than helping me to understand the sport.

2.6.3 Long Sentences

Long sentences can be used to emphasize the relationships and highlight the significant details. However, they establish complexity in the text when they are not used in the proper way to show amplification and clarification. (ibid)

2.7 Use shorter sentences

The possibility of losing the essential meaning will be raised when sentences are long more than it is really needed. Consequently, the interest to read will be lost. That is why shorter sentences are more direct and much easier to understand. This is seen clearly in the governmental writing because there is a tendency to use longer sentences. (ibid: 105)

To write shorter sentences and editing long ones, we can overload sentences, use bullet points and then to tide up our writing.

On the other hand, long sentences can be the result of the following ways used in writing:

- The use of common phrases, especially stock ones that add nothing to the meaning of the sentence.
- The use of so many words in the time that one or two can be enough.
- The overloading of information in the sentence, which then oblige us to explain the meaning in unnecessary clauses.
- The use of the word "also" which almost indicates that the writer has just remembered something to add and which may cause to lose the main idea being written about.

The pace of the writing is always affected by sentence length. A good technique in writing is to vary between the long and the short sentences; but not to go from one extreme to the other. Writing more than three or four sentences in sequence and each of seven words will look fast and jumpy. While the effect will be the opposite if one writes only with long sentences. (ibid)

2.7.1 Avoid using too many words

One of the biggest impediments to write simple and comprehensible English is the use of more than one word when a word can do. Some of the common examples with their substitute are presented here:

A shorter version	→ instead of	The longer form
Ву	\rightarrow	On the part of
Because		On the account of the fact that
Now		At the present time
For example		Such as the following
The show ended		The show came to an end
Mostly		In the majority of instances

Another bad habit in writing is to combine words of the same meaning. Here are some of the common phrases used and which repeat themselves redundantly:

Simple English	\rightarrow instead of	The repetitive phrase
alternative	\rightarrow	
Monthly meetings		Regular monthly meetings
Eliminate		Eliminate altogether
For		For the purpose of
Recycling		Green recycling
Many ways		Many wide-ranging ways
Revert		Revert back

(Halliday, 1994: 224)

2.7.2 Avoid using overloaded sentences

The cramming of information into one sentence is very common in governmental writing. An example of a sentence of 45 words long can clearly illustrate this idea:

"The framework provides authorities and their partners with digital mapping and geographical data, as well as access to standardized property and street information, which are vital for the emergency services, as well as day to day in service provision, monitoring and planning across local government."

We can see that his sentence is after two points:

- 1- What does the framework provide? And
- 2- Why these are considered vital?

The difference is easy with this small change in the sentence:

"The framework provides authorities and their partners with digital mapping and geographical data, as well as access to standardized property and street information. These are vital for the emergency services, as well as day to day in service provision, monitoring and planning across local government."

In this second paragraph, the reader can have a pause to understand in what the framework provides, and then to discover why this is a good thing. The trick used here is to look for commas, and conjunctions like 'and' or 'which'. In addition, connecting words (like

'but', 'however', or 'so') may be added to make the sentences flow. (ibid)

2.7.3 The use of bullets

Sometimes bullet points are used to break up long sentences, facilitate the ideas included and to avoid overloading the sentence with our information

"The framework provides authorities and their partners with:

- digital mapping
- geographical data
- access to standardized property and street information.

These are vital for the emergency services, as well as day-to-day in service provision, monitoring and planning across local government.

In the governmental writing, bullets are useful in writing lists. The aims, statistical evidence, and indicators often seem to be clear when stated in a list format. Still, however we should keep in mind not to go too far in bulleting because doing this for the whole paragraph may distort our writing and does not necessarily clarify our information. (ibid: 226)

2.7.4 The arrangement

In the previous example, the sentence is divided into two by adding bullet points to its first part. We are still able to make the meaning more clear, however, by dispensing the excess words. For example, it is not necessary to specify the authorities and their partners in the first sentence. In addition, words like 'as well as' and 'day to day' in the second can be omitted as they are surplus words.

Assuming that it is clear whom the framework is providing information to. In our same context of the document, if we omit the excess words from the second, we will need to rewrite it.

"These are vital for the emergency services, as well as day to day in service provision, monitoring and planning across local government."

We see here, that two ideas are expressed, one is about the emergency services and the other is about the daily business of the local government. The word **vital** is important and well chosen. It means "necessary for life" and thus, is very suitable in the context of emergency services. We should remember that this was lost in the original 45-word sentence.

It is important to remember that our last sentence is powerfully placed to make a point. To end a paragraph dramatically, it is said that lives could be saved by this framework and this will force the reader to pay attention. Therefore, a new adjective is needed for the other part of this sentence.

Anew copy of the 45-word sentence may end up looking like this:

"The framework provides:

- digital mapping
- geographical data
- access to standardized property and street information.

This is invaluable for service provision, monitoring and planning across governmental writing. What's more, it is vital for the emergency services. (ibid: 229)

2.8 Academic writing and the good sentence length

Sentence length may seem unimportant in academic writing. However, the proper use of sentence length can clearly enhance the reader's experience. The best technique to make the writing clear and pleasant to read is to mix reasonably simple short sentences with complex long sentences. (ibid: 231)

2.9 Conclusion

The good proper average of a sentence is between 15 and 20 words. To achieve this we should:

- dispense all the unnecessary words
- check if a full stop can replace the comma.
- check if we can start a new sentence instead of using the word 'which'.
- make a reword and a rephrase whenever it is possible.

The trick is to find a balance between long and short sentences because using only long sentences makes the text difficult to read and sticking to use only short sentences makes the writing jumpy. In short, the code for the good writing is to give 'pace' to our writing.

The sentence length we choose depends on the purpose of the sentence. However, the main issue to remember is that we should not worry about each sentence. All what we have to do is only to apply the analysis of sentence length whenever we see a problem in our writing.

We should not stick to use only long or only short sentences; we should mix to change the tone. Reading a text, which is full of variations in the length of its sentences, is much more pleasant than reading monotonous sentences. When sentences are short, reading feels like chopping. Long sentences can be vague and difficult to follow.

It is better to use the mixture, the third tone of writing, the use of mixed sentence length. The mix of long and short sentences, so that the idea is to be kept up for the reader and at the same time the enjoyment to write. Contemporary style guides generally recommend the varying of sentence length so we can get rid of monotony and achieve appropriate emphasis.

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طُولُ الجُملة: مُراجَعةٌ نَظَرية

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الخُلاصة

يَبدُل الكُتّاب عادةً الكثيرَ من الجهد في اختيار الجُمل ذات الطولِ المناسب فيكتبُ البعض منهم نصوصاً باستخدام جُملٍ قصيرة قد تؤثر في تتاسقِ النص، فيما يميل البعض الاخر للكتابة باستخدام الجُمل الطويلة التي تجعل النص يبدو مُضجراً حتى لو لم يَكُن فعلاً كذلك. يشير مفهوم "طُول الجملة" في اللغةِ الإنكليزية الى عددِ الكلمات في الجملة وانً اغلبَ الصيغ التي تتصف بسهولةِ القراءة تستخدمُ عدد الكلمات في الجملة كمعيار لقياس مدى صعوبتها، ومع هذا ففي بعضِ الحالات تكونُ الجملة القصيرة أصعب للقراءة من مثيلتها الطويلة واحياناً يسهل الاستيعاب عند القارئ باستخدام جملةٍ طويلةٍ خصوصاً إذا كانت تحتوي على ما يُعرف بالتراكيب المُتساوية او المُتناظرة. وُناقشُ هذه الدراسة "الجملة" باعتبارها مفهوماً نحوياً اساسياً أضافةً الى مفهوم "طول الجُملة" ومن زوايا نحوية مُختلفة وبوجهاتِ نظرٍ مُتعددة.

تستعرض الدراسة ايضاً تعريفاً لِمُصطلحِ "طول الجملة" وتقدمُ معالجاتٍ مختلفة لهذا الاصطلاح إضافةً الى عددٍ من التقنيات التي وضعت للتعامل مع "الجملة" في أنواعِ النصوص المختلفة للوصول الى طريقةِ أفضل في الكتابة. تتم مناقشة كُلُّ هذه المَحاور للوصولِ الى نتيجةِ مُفيدة بخصوصِ "الطول" المثالي للجملة في أيِّ نوعِ من أنواعِ النُصوص.

كلمات مفتاحية: الجملة، طول الجملة، جملة قصيرة، جملة طويلة