Sentence Variety

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What is sentence variety and what can it do for your writing? The following quotes are great examples of how balancing long and short sentences can make your writing more engaging. Several short sentences in a row make writing seem choppy and boring. Several very long sentences make the writing drone on.

Variety is key.

How can you create a balance between short and long sentences, and how does that change the flow of ideas in your writing?

Example 1:
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, quoted in Roy Peter Clark, Writing Tools. Little, Brown, 2008.)

Example 2:
Anyone who looks with care into the good books shall find in them sentences of every length, on every imaginable subject, expressing the entire range of thoughts and feelings possible, in styles both as unified and various as the colors of the spectrum; and sentences that take such notice of the world that the world seems visible in their pages, palpable, too, so a reader might fear to touch those paragraphs concerned with conflagrations or disease or chicanery lest they be victimized, infected, or burned; yet such sentences as make the taste of sweet earth and fresh air—things that seem ordinarily without an odor or at all attractive to the tongue—as desirable as wine to sip or lip to kiss or bloom to smell; for instance this observation from a poem of Elizabeth Bishop’s:
‘Greenish-white dogwood infiltrated the wood, each petal burned, apparently, by a cigarette butt’—well, she’s right; go look—or this simile for style, composed by Marianne Moore: ‘It is as though the equidistant three tiny arcs of seeds in a banana had been conjoined by Palestrina’—peel the fruit, make the cut, scan the score, hear the harpsichord transform these seeds into music (you can eat the banana later); yet also, as you read these innumerable compositions, to find there lines that take such flight from the world that the sight of it is wholly lost, and, as Plato and Plotinus urge, that reach a height where only the features of the spirit, of mind and its dreams, the pure formations of an algebraic absolute, can be made out; for the o’s in the phrase ‘good books’ are like owl’s eyes, watchful and piercing and wise.