

Clarifying Long, Complicated Sentences

Is your sentence too long and complicated? Ask yourself:

- 1) How many ideas am I trying to communicate with this one sentence?
- 2) Are any of these ideas repetitive?
- 3) Do all of these ideas relate to each other?
- 4) Do some of these ideas need *more* emphasis than they have right now?
- 5) Do some of these ideas need *less* emphasis than they have right now?
- 6) Does my wording confuse the basic meaning of the sentence?

Suggested remedies:

- 1) Try to divide sentences by replacing semicolons, conjunctions, and other clause joiners with periods.
- 2) Identify dependent clauses and develop those ideas further in a separate sentence.
- 3) Eliminate tangential information and nonessential parenthetical comments. If it is an academic paper, some of this information might be more useful as a footnote.
- 4) If you find that you just can't break down an unusually long sentence, try reordering the information.
 - a. Identify the strongest claim and make that your independent clause/central section.
 - b. Check for passive constructions and replace them with more direct, concise active ones.
 - c. If all else fails, make sure the sentences around it are relatively short so that the rest of the paragraph still appears under control.

Example

First Draft:

In his introduction to *Mumia Abu-Jamal, Live from Death Row*, John Edgar Wideman asserts that today's neo-slave narratives—the often told story of an African American shifting from a location of captivity to one of freedom, one of degradation to one of enlightenment, or any of a number of other value laden dichotomies—rather formulaically follow a trajectory that actually reinforces the social dynamics of racism they are intended to combat, and while often illuminating and encouraging, such narratives still leave us with characters who inhabit an enslaved world because they remain within the same political economic system, continue to hold to the same cultural myths, and fail to resist the dominant power structure, only now they live north of the Ohio River.

Revision:

The contemporary neo-slave narrative tells the story of an African American shifting from a location of captivity to one of freedom, one of degradation to one of enlightenment, or any of a number of other positive/negative dichotomies. Of this narrative form, however, John Edgar Wideman suggests that today's neo-slave narratives formulaically follow a trajectory that actually reinforces the social dynamics of racism they are intended to combat. Therefore, while often illuminating and encouraging, neo-slave narratives leave us with characters who continue to inhabit an enslaved world. Despite gaining freedom by moving north of the Ohio River, they fail to resist the dominant power structure and thus remain within the same slavery-based system.