Fifty! That's diamond, right? I guess that's how I feel about my writing sometimes, diamonds in the rough. I use lots of tools to try an polish those diamonds up - spell checkers - grammar checkers - human editors - beta readers - the occasional writing index tool. Last month I was looking for another tool - one that measured words per sentence. Google let me down. I couldn't find one - Well, I found one, but I needed a paid account to use it.

So what to do? Well, since I'm a programmer, too, I wrote one. First as an application on my Mac, then I turned it into PHP and put it on my web site. So in keeping with my desire to keep doing different things in this newsletter, here are my thoughts on word, sentence, and paragraph lengths and a tool to let you look at yours. To get on the mail list go to douglasgclarke.com/lists   Douglas G. Clarke

Words and Sentences and Paragraphs, oh no!

It all started when I was critiquing a friend's story. I read through the story. I liked the plot and the very descriptive writing, but when I was done it felt like the story had read "slow."

I thought about it for a while and decided that it had to do with sentence and paragraph length – hers were very long. I told her this and I got the equivalent of a strange look in her reply.

So I took to explaining why sentence and paragraph lengths might change the perception of how fast the story is going. That's when my searching for a web tool to do such things began. I had this feeling that her sentences were longer than mine, but I wanted to have facts.

I wrote a quick application to do the various counting tasks. I quickly realized that what I really wanted was a graph. I updated the application and used it on her story and my story for comparison.

Her response to my second e-mail showed less confusion, but still some questions. The most pointed being, "Are shorter sentences supposed to be better?" So I wrote a reply with an explanation of when and why you might want different lengths of things. Here is an expanded explanation of the affects of sentence length.

Word length, sentence length and paragraph length are all about variety and speed.

Variety

"Variety," you say. "You mean like in the spice of life?"

That's right!

When writing, you want to keep your reader from getting board. You do that by changing things up. If you saw a sentence where all the words were the same length, you might think it looked strange. If you saw a whole page were all the words were the same length you'd find it hard to read.

Here are two examples of sentences that are made from mono-length words. Besides reading funny because I forced myself to use only four letter words, see if your eyes have a hard time following it like mine do,

Jill kept more wine than hope, less good luck fade away. Jeff will send four dogs west when Jill says okay.

While not a good example, can you see the point? Here is one that is even harder to read:

Whosoever uprooted puppetry toyshops foregoes specific thievery, therefor, slapping southern eyesores upstairs.

A variety of word lengths give your eyes something to lock on to and helps make each word more distinct and therefore easier to grasp.

The same is true of sentence length. If all your sentences are three and four words long, it's going to be a pretty boring read. You won't have room for flowery adjectives or descriptive adverbs.

On the other hand, if all your sentences are twenty and thirty words long it can be just as boring,

and harder to read. If this column was one long sentence you would probably get lost part way through and might even forget what the subject of the sentence was. While longer sentences can contain lots of detail and be a joy to read, if they are all long then some of that joy disappears.

Like so many other things, our sentences are special only when compared to the other sentences we've written. Having great detail followed by short hard hitting sections make both feel more special.

These same ideas apply to paragraphs. If all your paragraphs are three sentences long, the pattern will be obvious very soon. If all your paragraphs are twenty sentences long it will be just as obvious and may cause some people to just put your story down. But, when you as a reader can look ahead and see different lengths, if can give your subconsciousness the hope of future short sections to help you focus on the long ones you're reading.

In wrapping up this section on length up, let me say one last thing about length, line-length.

For technical writing some editors will insist on fully justifying the lines on a page. While fully justifying lines may make the text look more uniform, and therefor more learned, fully justified text is harder to read. However, in fiction you will still see many, if not all, books written fully justified.

I'm not sure why this is. Maybe it is an effort to make the finished work "look" professional. There are many studies and books written about text layout that talk about the benefits of a ragged right edge and the importances of white space.

Line length is also the reason that you see many pieces of written work in a multi-column format. One line that is a full seven inches long can be hard to read and also if you have shorter paragraphs may make your paragraphs only one line long.

So take a look at the things you are reading and look at lengths and see which are easier for you to read. Web sites like CNN use a ragged right margin. Try copying that text into your word processor and look at it fully justified and left justified. Look at it as one column and two. Find out what you like and then when you write you can make choices instead of just having your work come out however it wants.

Did you notice that some of these paragraphs have ragged right edges and some are justified? Which do you like better?

Speed

The second thing that length does is affect how your reader perceives time passing. The faster it is to read something, the faster the story feels like it is going.

If you have short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs, it will take it less time to read and therefore make it feel like things are moving faster.

If you have long words, sentences and paragraphs then the story will be moving slower.

So which is better?

Neither.

Each has it's own purpose and is less without the other.

Short sentences pull the reader along, but if you have the reader running all the time they get tired. Short sentences make a page turner, but traveling fast means you miss the details.

Long words, sentences and paragraphs have more meaning, they carry depth, they are the thing that pulls your reader into the story and makes them care. The longer elements give the reader a chance to rest emotionally while at the same time making them work intellectually.

Short, fast stretches of text can get the readers hearts pumping while letting their minds rest.

So, the answer is balance and variety. How many times have you gone to a movie and walked out saying either, "That sure was exciting, I just wish it had actually had a plot," or "That was interesting, I just wish that it hadn't spent so much time digging into ..."

Now, of course, everyone is different. What might be fast for one person might seem slow to another, but for both people a story that has fast parts and slow parts will keep both fresher.

The Tool

As an example, the next page is an excerpt from my novel. You can fine the tool on my company web site, agoodtale.com.

To use the tool, simply place some text into the big empty text box and press the "Count" button.

The page will refresh and show you information on your story. Play with the tool. Try different samples of your text. Try short pieces and long ones.

Anger

Another day of sitting and wondering what their fate would be while trapped inside of metal cages. Cadmon and Hector were actually looking forward to the bone they might be getting for dinner.

The sun struggled to brighten the world for a few more moments – throwing vivid reds across the sky – while Hector lay in his cage looking up at the sky, feeling an anger inside of himself that matched the brilliance of the sky. "How did it end up so wrong?" He yelled at the sky, and Cadmon. "Red Beard and Julie didn't deserve to die."

Cadmon didn't respond - Hector hadn't really expected him to - neither did the sky.

Hector tried to calm himself and after a few moments spoke in a much softer voice. "I don't like feeling like this. I don't want to hate, but I'm just so angry. It makes me want to cry."

Cadmon rolled onto his side and looked over at Hector. "Maybe that's what you need to do, cry I mean. It's been six days and I don't think I've heard you cry once."

"I don't want to cry."

"Sometimes it doesn't mater what you want. I know you guys were close. I knew Red Beard and I worked with Julie once before. I'm pretty shaken. I can only imagine how much worse you must be doing. I feel a loss inside, there must a gaping hole inside of you."

"It's not about me. It's about Julie and Red Beard. The foeturs killed them and I'm mad about it." Hector started fuming again. "I just want to get out of here so I can avenge them. I want to make those foeturs pay with their lives."

Cadmon waited a few minutes while Hector calmed down again. "Is that what you really want Hector? Do you really want to kill foeturs to avenge their deaths?"

"Yes!" Hector spat back.

"That doesn't sound like the Hector I know. I thought you were fighting to protect your friends – because you love them. Now you're saying you want to fight because you hate."

"No! Yes – I don't know." Hector shook his head in frustration.

"Is it really about them, or is it about you?"

Hector just sat there looking at Cadmon, not knowing what to say. Thoughts were racing through his mind, but one kept returning – am I angry or hurt? He thought about both, asking why am I angry?, and why am I hurt? After an hour of stewing he came to the realization that he was both angry and hurt, and that in part he was angry because he was hurting, and he was hurting because, as Cadmon had said, there was a gaping hole inside of him.

Having acknowledged the loss he was feeling, the emotions came flooding in. Hector cried as he thought of never seeing Julie again. His body shook as he said goodbye to Red Beard. He lay on the rough bars of the cage and gave into his memories – remembering trips and conversations, funny faces and fireside stories. He didn't quite cry the five days of tears he had been holding back, but he came close.

That evening, in the midst of his grief, Hector brought himself out of his misery. He clung to the hope that since Annay had not been brought to camp, that she might have escaped, and that he believed and followed a God that loved him. In his solitude he prayed to his heavenly father before he fell asleep.

God, my heart is heavy. I think of my fallen friends and my mind cries out. I am reminded of them and my heart is broken. My soul cries out in anguish. My body quakes as tears stream down my face. Lord, guard me as I grieve; be my strength in my weakness. Keep my enemies from using my weakness against me. Be my shield and my support. Thank, you oh God, for lifting my spirits; thank you for delivering Annay. I call to you and bless you for your mercies. Continue to show your mercies to us.

Lets start by looking at word length. There are 680 words in the story with an average of 3.9 letters per word. That's actually a little low. I might want to look at the words I'm using and make sure I'm not writing to simplistically. Here is the word length graph for this section of text.
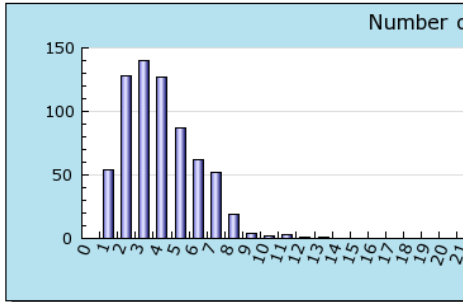

It shows that I actually have a good spread of word length with even a few in the 10+ letters. Still I should look to make sure.

The next piece of information is on sentence length. There are 56 sentences with an average length of 12.1 words.

That's actually a little long for me. I'm usually in the 8 to 9 word range. Depending on which Internet source you choose to quote you can get lots of different average lengths. Here is one I found interesting.

"Based on several studies, press associations in the USA have laid down a readability table. Their survey shows readers find sentences of 8 words or less very easy to read; 11 words, easy; 14 words fairly easy; 17 words standard; 21 words fairly difficult; 25 words difficult and 29 words or more, very difficult."

That puts my average in the "easy to fairly easy range. The graph of the sentences in this piece is also interesting.
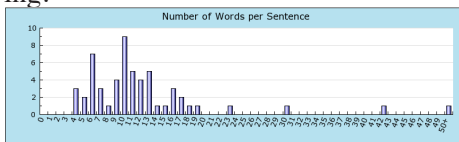
Four of my sentences are quite long, 23, 30, 42 and 50+ so my average with out these four very long sentences is more like 10 words. Now there is some dialog in this piece and dialog tends to be shorter.

The next statistic listed in the report is paragraph length. This selection has 17 paragraphs with an average of 3.3 sentences per paragraph. This again is a bit low, but the dialog is also pulling this average down. The graph looks like this.
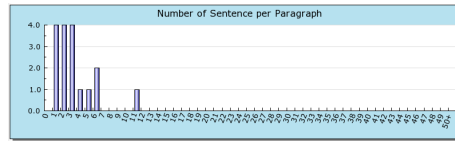
Instead of a bell curve, like most of the other graphs sort of look like, this one is very loaded on the small size. I might want to look at increasing my paragraph length, because all short paragraphs means I'm not clumping my thoughts very well.

In this case the short paragraphs might be good for another reason. This section of story is pretty heavy. Hector is dealing with grief. Some readers might be uncomfortable with the topic, so by keeping the sentences and paragraphs short the whole section will read faster and that can make it feel a little more distant and therefor less threatening. Later in the story, when the reader is more prepared for it, the story will slow down and spend more time looking at the character's feelings.

The last piece of information the tool provides is a graph showing sentence length over time. For me this can be the most interesting graph. It shows how the story is flowing. It actually shows two things. There is a bar for each sentence and a gap between each paragraph.

This means I can see both sentence length and paragraph length over the length of the piece. So what does this graph show?

Lets start at the end, there is a paragraph that is 11 sentences long – that's the prayer – but all the sentences are pretty short.

Before that are three paragraphs with long sentences in them. That's the summary at the end. The story is spending some time going into details as it wraps up.

Before that are four paragraphs that are short and have short sentences. That's the "action" of this piece. The dialog and Hector realizing that he has a problem.

Before that is a transitional paragraph and before that two long paragraphs which are the set up.

Continuing back we see a line of dialog and then the rest is the introduction to the setting.

So what does this all tell me? Maybe nothing except that I do have some variation, which is good, and that my sentences and paragraphs may be a bit short. In this case I think it also points out that I might have too much setup and conclusion and not enough actual action, but when I look at the piece and see that it is a transitional piece in the story and not an action piece, this might be right.

What does the next section look like?
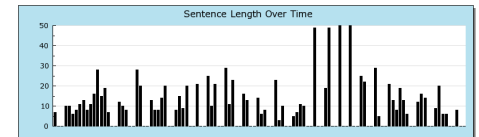
It a journal entry where Annay is remembering. It's got four 50+ word sentences and a very long 14 sentence introductory paragraph. It's average is 3 sentences per paragraph.

I'll leave you now to go and try my tool on your own work and wish you happy writing.

Douglas