

The Jazz Sentence

No, “jazz sentence” does not refer to the lifetime poverty of jazz musicians, or what a judge might give you if you mess up a chord progression. Jazz sentences are phrases, or the musical equivalent of sentences with words. To borrow some sentence-grammar terms, we can have jazz phrases that are simple, complex, compound, compound-complex, or even run-on.

Simple Sentences

A simple jazz phrase conveys one basic thought, and it’s usually short.

Pro: It creates an open feeling to the solo.

Con: Unless the ideas are interesting, multiple simple phrases can detract from the energy of the solo.

Complex Sentences

A complex jazz phrase conveys one thought that’s more complicated.

Pro: It challenges the listener and adds variety to the solo.

Con: Unless development is used between complex phrases, they can sometimes leave the listener trying to sort out the unsolved relationships.

Compound Sentences

A compound jazz phrase conveys several basic thoughts, linked together.

Pro: It adds contrast to simple or complex phrases.

Con: It can lead to overload, or the habit of rambling on without properly ending the phrase.

Complex–Compound Sentences

A complex-compound jazz phrase conveys several more complicated thoughts, linked together.

Pro: If the material is interesting and it’s executed well, it can add a lot of energy or intensity to the solo.

Con: This is the most difficult kind of phrase to handle, and it can quickly lead to information overload.

Run-on Sentences: Avoid Them!

In grammar, there are specific conditions that create a run-on sentence (a sentence that should be divided into two or more sentences). In jazz, the basic guideline is this: if your phrases are overloaded, stop and divide them up appropriately. Running out of air shouldn’t be the criteria for the end of a horn or vocal phrase, and making a mistake shouldn’t be the only reason a rhythm section player ends a phrase. Yes, jazz phrases can be very long at times, but they should only be that way if they are *interesting*. I often hear soloists on jazz CDs who start off with a great idea but then proceed to over-extend the phrase and kill off the idea. That’s sad.

To Summarize ...

1. Learn how to build effective phrases with each of the types mentioned above.
2. Vary the phrase types, just as you would in writing a book.
3. Use SHAPE to guide you – get a variety of interesting musical shapes.