

Some principles for clear writing

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After Joseph M. Williams: „Style – toward clarity and grace“
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Summary (by James B. DeLong, found at amazon.de)

“... Williams believes that readers find sentences easy to read and understand when the logic of the thought follows the logic of the sentence: the subjects of sentences should be the actors, and the verbs of the sentence should be the crucial actions. The beginning of a sentence should look back and connect the reader with the ideas that have been mentioned before. The end of the sentence should look forward, and is the place to put new ideas and new information.

His advice continues at the level of the paragraph. The sentences that make up a paragraph should have consistent topics. New topics and new themes should be found at the end of a paragraph's introductory sentence (or sentences). Readers will find a paragraph to be coherent if it has one single articulate summary sentence, which is almost always found either at the end of the paragraph or as the last of the paragraph's introductory sentences. ...”

Writing clear sentences

Avoid abstraction, be concrete and specific, tell stories.

- (1) Make the subjects of your sentences the main *characters*. (Of course, characters do not have to be persons.)
- (2) Make the verbs going with the subjects name the crucial *actions* the characters are part of.

This will help turning sentences like

Our lack of knowledge about local conditions precluded determination of committee action effectiveness in fund allocation to those areas in greatest need of assistance.

to something much more direct like

Because we knew nothing about local conditions, we could not determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to areas that most needed assistance.

In many cases, editing sentences in this way means to eliminate nominalizations and passives. (But note that neither nominalizations nor passive voice are bad *per se*.)

More examples:

The cause of our educational system's failure at teaching basic skills to children is not understanding the influence of their cultural background on learning.	Our educational system fails to teach children basic skills because we do not understand how their cultural background influences the way they learn.
Our lack of data prevented evaluation of state action in targeting funds to areas in need of assistance.	Because we lacked the data, we could not evaluate whether the state had targeted funds to areas that needed assistance.
Our analysis of the results of the experiment did not provide an explanation for its failure, because our data collection lacked the precision needed.	When we analyzed the results of the experiment, we could not explain why it failed, because we did not collect data precisely.
A revision of the program will result in increases in our efficiency in servicing clients.	If we revise the program, we can serve clients more efficiently.

Managing the flow of ideas

Within a sentence, move *from old to new*, from familiar to unfamiliar, from less important to more important. The beginning of a sentence serves to prepare the new idea you are going to put forward in its end. The beginning looks back, the end looks forward.

Following these rules, you can create chains of logically connected sentences with the beginning of each sentence referring to the new information at the end of the preceding sentence (“domino”). For example:

Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists exploring the nature of *black holes* in space. A **black hole** is created by the collapse of a dead star into *a point perhaps no larger than a marble*. **So much matter compressed into so little volume** changes the fabric of space around it in profoundly puzzling ways.

The psychological structure of a sentence

1. Beginning of the sentence: *Topic* – what is the sentence about?

The topic is the psychological subject of a sentence. It is usually identical with the grammatical subject, but can, for example, also be placed into a introductory phrase:

As for **this question**, it is not clear how the committee will decide.

The choice of topics determines the reader's point of view on the story. Compare these:

When **Tom and I** bumped, **my glass** dropped, and **the juice** spilled.

When **I** bumped into Tom **I** dropped my glass and spilled the juice.

2. End of the sentence: *Stress* – what’s new about the topic?

Towards the end of a sentence, the pitch of the voice usually rises on one of the last few words. This stress position is the ideal place to put new and important information.

Managing the beginning of sentences

Get your sentences a brisk start with an appropriate topic. For example

Astronomers, physicists, and a host of other researchers entirely familiar with the problems raised by quasars have confirmed **these observations**.

is better changed to

These observations have been confirmed by astronomers, physicists, and a host of other researchers entirely familiar with the problems raised by quasars.

The topic of a sentence should be located in the first five or six words! This may be difficult, because there are so many things you might want to place at the beginning of a sentence. But try to avoid constructs like this:

And therefore, it is important to note, that from a practical point of view, in the Northeastern states in recent years, **these sources of acid rain** [topic] have been a matter of much concern. ...

Paragraphs should be organized around consistent *strings* of conceptually related words referring to their central characters and concept. The topics of individual sentences form *topic strings* containing the principle “characters”. They should be designed to focus the readers attention on a consistent point of view. *Thematic strings* contain more key words regarding the central concepts developed around the topics. New strings should be introduced at the end (stress position) of the introductory sentences of a paragraph (see below).

Here’s an example for a consistent topic string:

In this paragraph, I have boldfaced the topics of every clause. **Topics** are crucial for a reader because **they** focus the reader’s attention on a particular idea toward the beginning of a clause and thereby notify a reader what **a clause** is “about”. **Topics** thereby crucially determine whether the reader will feel **a passage** is coherent. Cumulatively, through a series of sentences, **these topicalized ideas** provide thematic signposts that focus the reader’s attention on a well-defined set of connected ideas. If **a sequence of topics** seems coherent, **that consistent sequence** will move the reader through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view. But if through that paragraph **topics** shift randomly, then **the reader** has to begin each sentence out of context, from no coherent point of view. When **that** happens, **the reader** will feel dislocated, disoriented, out of focus. **Whatever the writer announces as a topic**, then, will fix the reader’s point of view, not just toward the rest of the sentence, but toward whole sections.

In contrast, the following version of the same paragraph lacks a consistent topic string:

In this paragraph, **boldface** indicate topics. **Particular ideas toward the beginning of each clause** define what a passage is centrally “about” for a reader, so **a sense of coherence** crucially depends on topics. Cumulatively, **the thematic signposts that are provided by these ideas** should focus the reader’s attention toward a well-defined and limited set of connected ideas. **Moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view** is made possible by a sequence of topics that seem to constitute this coherent sequence of topicalized ideas. **A seeming absence of context for each sentence** is one consequence of making random shifts in topics. Feelings of **dislocation, disorientation, and lack of focus** will occur when **that** happens. **The seeming coherence of whole sections** will turn on a reader's point of view as a result of topic announcement.

Note also that in this version the topics are much bulkier and less easy to grasp.

A final remark: Don’t make your topic and thematic strings diffuse by aiming at “elegant” variation. Do not use two different words for one concept when your readers might take them for two different concepts.

Managing the end of sentences

Use the stressed (high pitched) position at the end of a sentence to transport its most important information. Don’t make your sentences end weakly. Avoid sentences where the voice trails off into a lower note at the end. Shift unimportant information to the left and important information to the right. Some examples:

The data that are offered to establish the existence of ESP do not make believers of us **for the most part** [weak ending].

For the most part, the data that are offered to establish the existence of ESP do not make us believers.

No one can explain why that first primeval superatom exploded and thereby created the **universe in a few words**.

No one can explain **in a few words** why that first primeval superatom exploded and thereby created the universe.

The opportunities we offer are particularly rich at the graduate level, **it must be remembered**.

The opportunities we offer are, **it must be remembered**, particularly rich at the graduate level.

Don’t hide important points in the middle of a long sentences. If necessary, break the sentence apart.

Under the Clean Water Act, the EPA will promulgate new standards for the treatment of industrial wastewater prior to its discharge into sewers leading to publicly owned treatment plants, with pretreatment standards for types of industrial sources being **discretionary, depending on local conditions**, instead of imposing nationally uniform standards now required under the Act.

Under the Clean Water Act, the EPA will promulgate new standards for the treatment of industrial waste water before it is discharged into sewers leading to publicly owned treatment plants. Unlike the

standards now required under the act, the new standards will not be uniform across the whole nation, They instead will be **discretionary, depending on local conditions**.

When introducing a technical term for the first time – or even a familiar but very important term – design the sentence it appears in so that you can locate that term at the end, in its stress, never at the beginning, in its topic, even if you have to invent a sentence simply for the sake of defining or emphasizing that term.

The **sarcomere** is the fundamental unit of muscle contraction. Its **thick filament** is composed of **myosin**, which is an **ATPase** or energy-producing protein. **Actin**, **tropomyosin**, and **troponin** make up its **thin filament**. [Not too bad, but can be improved:]

The fundamental unit of muscle contraction is the **sarcomere**. The sarcomere has two **filaments**, one **thin** and one **thick**. These filaments are composed of proteins that cause contraction. One is in the thick filament – the protein **actin**. The other protein is in the thick filament – **myosin**, an energy-producing or **ATPase** protein. [Alternative: The thick filament is composed of actin and the thin filament of myosin. Myosin is an energy-producing of ATPase protein.]

Here is a final example, which you can use as an exercise. The first version is rather horrible:

Since the discovery that one factor in Alzheimer's disease might be genetic, great strides in its early and accurate diagnosis have occurred in recent years. Senility in an older patient who seemed to be losing touch with reality, an entirely different condition, was often confused with Alzheimer's not too long ago. Blood chemistry and genetic cues are new and more reliable tests to diagnose it in the past few years, however. The risk of human tragedy of another kind, though, has resulted from the increasing accuracy of these procedures: Long before the appearance of any of its overt symptoms, physicians may be able to predict Alzheimer's. At that point, an apparently healthy person could be devastated by such an early diagnosis.

The following is much better (but still not perfect, in my opinion):

In recent years, since the discovery that one factor in Alzheimer's disease might be genetic, researchers have made great strides in its early and accurate diagnosis. Not too long ago, when a physician examined an older patient who seemed out of touch with reality, she had to guess whether that person had Alzheimer's or was senile, an entirely different condition. In the past few years, however, new and more reliable tests have focused on blood chemistry and genetic cues. [Today, the diagnosis can be based on new and more reliable tests that focus on blood chemistry and genetic clues.] But in the accuracy of these new tests lies the risk of human tragedy of another kind: Physicians may be able to predict Alzheimer's long before its overt appearance, but such an early diagnosis could psychologically devastate an apparently healthy person [but for an apparently healthy person, such an early diagnosis could be psychologically devastating].

Paragraph = Issue + Discussion

Paragraphs, as well as sections or whole documents, are divided into two parts:

- (1) *Issue*: A short opening segment of one or a few sentences introducing what the author is going to develop on. Toward the end of the issue, in the stress position of the last sentence, readers look for the concepts (topics and themes) the writer will discuss in the following section. A one-sentence issue is often called a *topic sentence*.
- (2) *Discussion*: The rest of the paragraph where the writer develops new ideas against the background of repeated topics and themes announced in the issue.

For example:

Inflation, both of prices and of population, presented a challenge to every family in later Tudor England. One of its ironies was that in the particular economic circumstances of the time it often made a reality of what medieval people had tended to believe, that one person's good fortune was another's distress. Inflation in prices was bound to be socially divisive. The growth of population, itself the main cause of the increase in prices, ensured that those who suffered most were those most dependent on the earning of wages. But there were others, perhaps only a minority, at all social levels, whose income failed to keep pace with the rising cost of living, ...

The issue promises, the discussion delivers.

The end of the issue is particularly important. It frequently contains a point sentence summarizing the paragraph's main message (see below). At the same time, in its stress position, it has to "kick off" the central topic and thematic strings of the following discussion:

Clark's practice of carefully mapping every fossil made it possible to **follow the evolutionary development of various types through time**.

If, instead, the paragraph would be dealing with mapping techniques the introductory phrase might look like this:

Clark made it possible to follow the evolutionary development of various types through time by **carefully mapping every fossil**.

The point of a paragraph

Each paragraph should contain a single sentence summarizing its main message, the central idea. This *point* sentence should be located either at the end of the issue, or at the end of the discussion. In the following example, the point is the third (and last) sentence of the issue:

Writing well involves so many skills that it is hard to know where to begin describing what makes a good writer. Among other consideration, a writer must be sensitive to words, style, organization, subject matter, logic, emotion, audience. **Perhaps the most crucial of these, though, is a sensibility to one's audience, to how readers read. ...**

In most cases, the position at the end the issue is a good choice. The sentences before the point then may (1) provide a transition from the previous paragraph, (2) make a general claim which is then specified in the point or (3) make a preliminary claim that the point sentence rejects.

Placing the point at the end of the discussion (i.e. at the end of the paragraph) may be desirable for two reasons. First, the writer might want to develop his arguments before making his claim. The point then emerges as the culmination of the previous discussion. Second, the point is best placed at the end of the discussion if the writers wants to further elaborate on it in the next paragraph. This situation is typical for introductory paragraphs of whole documents.