

Better Writing Tips

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(from, *George D. Gopen and Judith A. Swan. The Science of Scientific Writing. American Scientist 78:550-558, 1990*)

I. Writing with the Reader in Mind: Expectation and Context

The misplacement of old and new information turns out to be the number one problem in American professional writing today. This is because most writers produce prose linearly (from left to right) and through time. As they begin to formulate a sentence, often their primary anxiety is to capture the important new thought before it escapes. If the new thought is not connected logically to the previous thought, the reader has to divert energy from the message being communicated to reconnecting the train of thought. The result is confusion about the message or missing it altogether.

We would do well to understand better how readers go about reading in order to improve the quality of writing. For example, in constructing a table of information, we place the contextual material on the left to set the readers expectation. The interesting results are placed on the right of the table in a less obvious pattern, the discovery of which is the whole point of the table. Since we read from left to right, we prefer the context on the left, where it can more effectively familiarize the reader. We prefer the new, important information to be discovered on the right, since its job is to intrigue the reader.

When structural expectations are violated, it forces readers to divert energy from understanding the content of a passage to unraveling its structure; instead, the aim should be to reduce the readers syntactical burden. Improving the quality of writing has the added benefit of improving the quality of the writer's thought process.

II. Reader Expectations for the Structure of Prose

1. Subject-Verb Separation

- Long sentences need not be difficult to read; they are only difficult to write.
- Readers properly expect a grammatical subject to be followed *immediately* by the verb. Without the verb, we do not know what the subject is doing, or what the sentence is all about.

2. The Stress Position

- The *stress position* is usually at the end of a sentence and it contains the new information. Since readers naturally emphasize the material at the end of a sentence, the stress position coincides with the completion of the thought.
- A semicolon can create a second stress position, if needed, to emphasize or introduce additional related information.
- Three rhetorical principles:

1. Grammatical subjects should be followed, when possible, by their verbs.
 2. Every unit of discourse, no matter the size, should serve a single function or make a single point.
 3. Information intended to be emphasized should appear at the stress position.
- In place of the word-limit concept for best sentence length, use the following definition: A sentence is too long when it has more viable candidates for stress positions than there are stress positions available. Break into new sentences, or use semicolon separators, for each stress position and each separate new thought will be more easily understood by the reader.
3. The Topic Position
- In the *topic position* the reader needs and expects perspective and context for the new thought. Readers expect to be reading a story about whoever, or whatever, appears first.
- The information in the topic position prepares the reader for upcoming material by connecting it backward into the previous discussion (or sentence); new information which is important enough to receive emphasis functions best in the stress position.
4. Checklist for Clarity During Draft Revision:
- The backward-linking old information should appear in the topic position near the beginning of each sentence.
- The person, thing or concept the story is about should also appear in the topic position of the sentence carrying the main idea for the paragraph.
- The new, emphasis-worthy information should appear in the stress position later in the sentence.
5. Perceiving Logical Gaps
- The absence of old (previous) information in the topic position produces a logical gap. Readers must then construct the logical linkage themselves.
- Filling in the gaps is reader friendly.
6. Locating the Action
- Readers expect the action of a sentence to be articulated by the verb.
7. Summary of Structural Principles for Achieving Good Comprehension:
- Follow a grammatical subject immediately, when possible, with its verb.
- Place in the stress position the "new information" you want the reader to emphasize. The word "both" can notify the reader of two pieces of new information.
- Place the person or thing whose "story" a sentence is telling at the beginning of the sentence, in the topic position.
- Place appropriate "old information" (material already stated in the discourse) in the topic position for linkage backward and contextualization forward.
- Articulate the action of every clause or sentence with the proper verb.
- In general, provide context for your reader (in the topic position) before asking that reader to consider anything new (in the stress position).