

# STYLE

LESSONS IN CLARITY AND GRACE

THIRTEENTH EDITION

JOSEPH M. WILLIAMS

JOSEPH BIZUP



# Style

## Lessons in Clarity and Grace

THIRTEENTH EDITION

**Joseph M. Williams**

*The University of Chicago*

**Joseph Bizup**

*Boston University*



**Executive Portfolio Manager:** Aron Keesbury  
**Content Producer:** Barbara Cappuccio  
**Content Developer:** David Kear  
**Portfolio Manager Assistant:** Christa Cottone  
**Senior Product Marketing Manager:**  
Michael Coons  
**Product Marketing Manager:** Nicholas Bolt  
**Content Producer Manager:** Ken Volcjak  
**Managing Editor:** Cynthia Cox

**Digital Studio Course Manager:** Elizabeth Bravo  
**Full-Service Project Management:** Integra Software Services  
**Printer/Binder:** LSC Communications, Inc.  
**Cover Printer:** LSC Communications, Inc.  
**Senior Art Director:** Cate Barr  
**Cover Design:** Cadence Design Studio

Acknowledgements of third party content appear on page 223, which constitutes an extension of this copyright page.

**Copyright © 2021, 2017, 2014 by Pearson Education, Inc. 221 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, or its affiliates. All Rights Reserved.** Printed in the United States of America. This publication is protected by copyright, and permission should be obtained from the publisher prior to any prohibited reproduction, storage in a retrieval system, or transmission in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise. For information regarding permissions, request forms and the appropriate contacts within the Pearson Education Global Rights & Permissions department, please visit [www.pearsoned.com/permissions/](http://www.pearsoned.com/permissions/).

PEARSON, ALWAYS LEARNING, and Revel are exclusive trademarks owned by Pearson Education, Inc. or its affiliates, in the U.S., and/or other countries.

Unless otherwise indicated herein, any third-party trademarks that may appear in this work are the property of their respective owners and any references to third-party trademarks, logos or other trade dress are for demonstrative or descriptive purposes only. Such references are not intended to imply any sponsorship, endorsement, authorization, or promotion of Pearson's products by the owners of such marks, or any relationship between the owner and Pearson Education, Inc. or its affiliates, authors, licensees or distributors.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Williams, Joseph M., author. | Bizup, Joseph, author.  
Title: Style : lessons in clarity and grace / Joseph M. Williams,  
Joseph Bizup.

Description: Thirteenth edition. | Boston : Pearson, [2021] |  
Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018048575 | ISBN 9780135171837 |  
ISBN 0135171830

Subjects: LCSH: English language—Style. | English language—  
Technical English. | English language—Business English. |  
English language—Rhetoric. | Technical writing. |  
Business writing.

Classification: LCC PE1421 .W545 2021 | DDC 808/.042—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018048575>

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode



### **Access Code Card:**

ISBN-10: 0-13-516375-7

ISBN-13: 978-0-13-516375-7

### **Rental Edition:**

ISBN-10: 0-13-517183-0

ISBN-13: 978-0-13-517183-7

### **Instructor's Review Copy:**

ISBN-10: 0-13-517177-6

ISBN-13: 978-0-13-517177-6

# Contents

Preface	v
In Memoriam	x
Introduction	1
<b>PART ONE</b> Style as Choice	5
<b>Lesson One</b> Correctness and Style	6
<b>PART TWO</b> Clarity	23
<b>Lesson Two</b> Actions	24
<b>Lesson Three</b> Characters	40
<b>Lesson Four</b> Cohesion and Coherence	58
<b>Lesson Five</b> Emphasis	71
<b>PART THREE</b> Clarity of Form	85
<b>Lesson Six</b> Framing Documents	86
<b>Lesson Seven</b> Framing Sections	100
<b>PART FOUR</b> Grace	111
<b>Lesson Eight</b> Concision	112
<b>Lesson Nine</b> Shape	125
<b>Lesson Ten</b> Elegance	145

<b>PART FIVE</b>	Ethics	159
<b>Lesson Eleven</b>	The Ethics of Clarity	160
<b>Lesson Twelve</b>	Beyond Clarity	171
Appendix I: Punctuation		180
Appendix II: Using Sources		197
Glossary		209
Suggested Answers		217
Acknowledgments		223
Index		225

# Preface

*Most people won't realize that writing is a craft.  
You have to take your apprenticeship in it like anything else.*

—KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

In preparing this thirteenth edition of *Style*, my third, I have endeavored to refresh the book while remaining true to the qualities and features that have made it a classic of its kind. The book has demonstrated an enduring usefulness, but it is more than just a practical guide. Joseph M. Williams wrote with an urgency motivated by his conviction that clear writing not just a technical accomplishment but a social necessity and ethical good. “Writing has consequences,” Joe wrote in a 1979 article anticipating his book: “Whatever does not bear on those consequences is irrelevant to our task—to help our students become what they want to be.” In my own work with his text, I have tried to keep this high ideal in mind.

The most obvious changes are those prompted by the creation of a new interactive online version of the book and by the print edition’s shift to a color format. I also allowed myself somewhat more authorial latitude than I did in the eleventh and twelfth editions. In those editions, my standard was to make only changes I believed Joe would have embraced. In this edition, I also introduced changes that I hope I could have persuaded Joe to accept.

## What’s New in the Thirteenth Edition

Here, specifically, is what’s changed:

- I have retitled several of the lessons so that they better indicate their content.
- I cut the lesson on understanding style that opened previous editions. The bulk of this lesson was devoted to a short history of unclear writing in English, which, although informative, was not directly relevant to the purposes of most readers. The book now begins with a short introduction that incorporates some of the content from that deleted lesson and moves directly to the important lesson on correctness.
- To take advantage of the new color format, I updated the coding of sentences and also the diagrams illustrating the principles of style.
- I revised and updated examples and exercises throughout the book, seeking to expand the range of topics and subjects they address.

- I once again revised and expanded the section on gender-inclusive language in Lesson 1. This treatment was substantially revised for the twelfth edition, but our society's discourse on gender has progressed so much in even the past few years that another revision was needed. The book now also takes up the issue of gender-inclusive language from an ethical perspective in Lesson 11.
- I made a number of changes to the book's treatment of the ethics of style. Most obviously, I split what had been a single lesson into two: Lesson 11 now considers the ethics of clarity through a series of short examples, and Lesson 12 contains Williams's extended analysis inviting readers to ponder matters of style that transcend considerations of clarity. Most significantly, I added a new ethical principle to the book. Previous editions argued for what Williams called the First Rule of an ethical style: write to others as you would have others write to you. But this rule, in personalizing all writing, only awkwardly covers situations in which writers' interests might not entirely align with those of their readers. To accommodate those situations, I renamed Williams's First Rule of style the "golden rule" of style and introduced a second "silver rule": *do not* write to others as you would *not* have others write to you. If Williams's golden rule is a principle of empathy, its corollary silver rule is a principle of fairness. Not all situations allow writers to subordinate their interests to those of their readers, but we can still expect writers not to be deceptive, misleading, or unnecessarily obtuse. I also revised the treatment of the examples in Lesson 11 to invite more questions and discussion. Finally, in Lesson 12, I retired Williams's analysis of the Declaration of Independence, which had been in the book since the tenth edition, and replaced it with a version of his analysis of Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, a speech that in today's fractious political climate has a renewed relevance and resonance.
- I of course endeavored throughout to improve and refine the book's explanations of its concepts and principles and to eliminate errors where I found them.
- Finally, since the book's authorship has become more collective, I have somewhat wistfully decided to retire what Gregory G. Colomb, who edited the tenth edition, called Joe's "ubiquitous I's." This change is not inconsequential, for in choosing to use *I*, Williams was embracing the struggles of ordinary writers as his own. But with this edition, it just seemed too artificial for me to put my words directly into his mouth. Still, despite the dropping of the first-person singular, the book continues to be animated by this basic solidarity with its readers.

## What's The Same

For all these changes, the book continues to address the same questions it always has:

- What is it in a sentence that makes readers judge it as they do?
- How do we analyze our own prose to anticipate readers' judgments?
- How do we revise a sentence so that readers will think better of it?

The book's central point remains, in other words, what it always has been: that good style is a matter of making informed choices in the service of one's readers.

## REVEL™

Revel is an interactive learning environment that deeply engages students and prepares them for class. Media and assessment integrated directly within the authors' narrative lets students read, explore interactive content, and practice in one continuous learning path. Thanks to the dynamic reading experience in Revel, students come to class prepared to discuss, apply, and learn from instructors and from each other.

## Learn more about Revel

[www.pearson.com/revel](http://www.pearson.com/revel)

## Supplements

Make more time for your students with instructor resources that offer effective learning assessments and classroom engagement. Pearson's partnership with educators does not end with the delivery of course materials; Pearson is there with you on the first day of class and beyond. A dedicated team of local Pearson representatives will work with you to not only choose course materials but also integrate them into your class and assess their effectiveness. Our goal is your goal—to improve instruction with each semester.

Pearson is pleased to offer the following resource to qualified adopters of *Style*. This supplement is available to instantly download from Revel or on the Instructor Resource Center (IRC); please visit the IRC at [www.pearson.com/us](http://www.pearson.com/us) to register for access.

- **Instructor's Resource Manual** Create a comprehensive roadmap for teaching classroom, online, or hybrid courses. Designed for new and experienced instructors, the Instructor's Resource Manual includes learning objectives, lecture and discussion suggestions, activities for in or out of



class, research activities, participation activities, and suggested readings, series, and films as well as a Revel features section. Available within Revel and on the IRC.

## Acknowledgments

Revising this book once again has been a true pleasure, and I have benefited tremendously from my conversations and correspondence with many students, colleagues, and readers. Each year, the students in my Modern English Grammar and Style Seminar at Boston University give me an opportunity to test the ideas in this book on a new audience, and the book is better for their questions and insights. I likewise learned much from the participants in the seminars I facilitated on teaching with Style at the Boston Rhetoric and Writing Network (BRAWN) Summer Institute in 2014 and 2017, as well as from the participants in a series of workshops on academic writing I conducted at Columbia University between 2012 and 2017, first for the Institute for Social & Economic Research & Policy (ISERP) and later for the Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics (INCITE). I thank William McAllister and his team for organizing and sponsoring these events.

A number of readers of previous editions of the book have emailed me detailed comments and suggestions as well as descriptions of their own experiences reading or teaching the book. Some of these initial contacts have evolved into ongoing correspondences about the book. I am grateful to all of these readers, especially William Entriiken, Susan J. Fabian, Charles Fishkin, Antonio Gidi, and John Muse.

My colleagues at Boston University and elsewhere, especially Ingrid Anderson, Heather Barrett, John Brereton, Cinthia Gannett, Maria Gapotchenko, Esther Hu, Gwen Kordonowy, Sarah Madsen Hardy, Christopher McVey, Marisa Milanese, Matthew Parfitt, James Pasto, Sam Sarkisian, David Shawn, Thomas Underwood, Anthony Wallace, Christopher Walsh, Erica Zimmer, and Maria Zlateva, have continued to be sources of wisdom and inspiration. David Shawn generously shared his expertise on Abraham Lincoln, which was invaluable as I reintroduced to the book Williams's analysis of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. Jonathan Buehl and William T. FitzGerald read drafts of sections of this edition and spent many hours talking with me about the revision. The book is better for their help.

I thank the following reviewers for their comments on the twelfth edition: Elizabeth Baldwin, University of Washington School of Law; Lauren Brodsky, Harvard Kennedy School; Christopher Shinn, Georgetown University.

I thank Aron Keesbury, Executive Producer and Publisher of the Pearson Collegiate English books at Ohlinger Publishing Services; Cynthia Cox, Managing Editor, English, Ohlinger Publishing Services; Vigneswaran Balachandran, Project Manager; and David Kear, Development Editor, with whom I worked most closely and whose guidance and support were crucial to this project.

I remain indebted to Joe Williams for the time we spent together in 2008, when he visited the writing program I was then directing, and to Greg Colomb for his intellectual and professional guidance at crucial moments and for his friendship. My wife Annmarie and daughters Grace and Charlotte continue to sustain me with their love and support.

In the ninth edition, Joe acknowledged a great many people, including his students at the University of Chicago, other scholars to whom he was intellectually indebted, and the many readers and colleagues who shared observations and ideas with him. These include Theresa Ammirati, Yvonne Atkinson, Margaret Batschelt, Nancy Barendse, Charles Bazerman, Randy Berlin, Cheryl Brooke, Ken Bruffee, Christopher Buck, Douglas Butturff, Donald Byker, Bruce Campbell, Elaine Chaika, Avon Crismore, Constance Gefvert, Darren Cambridge, Mark Canada, Paul Contino, Don Freeman, Jim Garrett, Jill Gladstein, Karen Gocsik, Richard Grande, Jeanne Gunner, Maxine Hairston, Stan Henning, George Hoffman, Rebecca Moore Howard, John Hyman, Sandra Jamieson, Richard Jenseth, Elizabeth Bourque Johnson, Julie Kalish, Seth Katz, Bernadette Longo, Ted Lowe, Brij Lunine, Richard McLain, Joel Margulis, Susan Miller, Linda Mitchell, Ellen Moody, Ed Moritz, Patricia Murray, Neil Nakadate, Janice Neuleib, Ann Palkovich, Matthew Parfitt, Donna Burns Philips, Mike Pownall, Peter Priest, Keith Rhodes, John Ruszkiewicz, Margaret Shaklee, Nancy Sommers, Laura Bartlett Snyder, John Taylor, Mary Taylor, Bill Vande Kopple, James Vanden Bosch, Stephen Witte, Joseph Wappel, Alison Warriner, Wendy Wayman, Patricia Webb, Kevin Wilson, Linda Ziff. I thank them again here on his behalf.

I allow Joe to acknowledge his family himself:

And again, those who contribute to my life more than I let them know: Oliver, Michele, and Eleanor; Chris and Ingrid; Dave, Patty, Owen, and Matilde; Megan, Phil, Lily, and Calvin; and Joe, Christine, Nicholas, and Katherine. And at beginning and end still, Joan, whose patience and love flow more generously than I deserve.

*Joseph Bizup*  
Boston, Massachusetts

# In Memoriam

Joseph M. Williams, 1933–2008  
*il miglior fabbro* [the best craftsman]  
(by Gregory G. Colomb)

On February 22, 2008, the world lost a great scholar and teacher, and I lost a dear friend. For almost thirty years, Joe Williams and I taught together, researched together, wrote together, drank together, traveled together, and argued together and apart. When those “apart” arguments led to what in the last edition he called “our intemperate shouting matches,” we grew closer—and wrote more thoughtfully—than ever. I knew his faults, but he was the best man I knew.

My epitaph for Joe—*il miglior fabbro*—puts him in exalted company: I take it from Dante, who applied it to the twelfth-century troubadour Arnaut Daniel, praised by Plutarch as the “Grand Master” of his craft. In the last century, T. S. Eliot famously said it of Ezra Pound. Of course, these poets were all known not for their clarity and grace but for their depth and difficulty. No matter, none have been better than they at their craft, just as none have been better than Joe at his. And Joe has the added distinction that his craft daily multiplies its good a thousand fold and more, in all those papers, reports, memos, and other documents that have served their readers better because of him.

# Introduction

*The great enemy of clear language is insincerity.*

—GEORGE ORWELL

This book rests on two convictions: it is good to write clearly, and anyone can.

The first is self-evident, especially to anyone who has had to hack through a sentence like this:

An understanding of causal factors driving male underperformance on standardized verbal proficiency tests is prerequisite to the potential development of pedagogical strategies showing greater effectiveness.

All of us would much rather read something like this:

If we understood why male students underperform on standardized tests of verbal proficiency, we could perhaps develop better ways of teaching them.

The second, though, may seem unrealistic to those who count themselves lucky if they can just get down a thought in any words whatsoever, those who feel they have enough on their plates without worrying about how those words will seem to their readers. But to write clearly, we *must* consider our readers. Specifically, we must choose words and patterns of words that will help rather than hinder them in their efforts to understand our ideas.

This book shows you how.

## The Causes of Unclear Writing

The best-known modern statement on English style, George Orwell's 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," anatomizes the stiff and abstract language of politicians, bureaucrats, and others who strive to inflate or even hide their meaning:

The keynote [of a pretentious style] is the elimination of simple verbs. Instead of being a single word, such as *break*, *stop*, *spoil*, *mend*, *kill*, a verb becomes a phrase, made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general-purposes verb such as *prove*, *serve*, *form*, *play*, *render*. In addition, the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds (*by examination of* instead of *by examining*).

But in condemning that style Orwell adopted it. He could have written more concisely:

Pretentious writers avoid simple verbs. Instead of using one word, such as *break*, *stop*, *spoil*, *mend*, *kill*, they turn the verb into a noun or adjective and tack it onto some general-purpose verb such as *prove*, *serve*, *form*, *play*, *render*. Wherever possible, they use the passive voice instead of the active and noun constructions instead of gerunds (*by examination of* instead of *by examining*).

If the best-known critic of an opaque style could not resist it, we shouldn't be surprised that writers of all stripes—students, scholars, scientists, lawyers, managers, politicians, and many others—likewise embrace it. The stakes are high, as Orwell understood. Ultimately, unclear writing is not merely an inconvenience to individual readers but a social and political ill. In its extreme forms it becomes a language of obfuscation and exclusion that dampens our thinking and enables, in Orwell's words, "the defence of the indefensible." That is something a healthy, ethical society cannot tolerate. We'll consider the ethical dimension of style in Part Five.

But whatever its public consequences, unclear writing often has private causes. Some writers plump up their prose, hoping their dense sentences will indicate deep thought or mask its absence. When we try to hide the fact that we don't know what we're talking about, we typically throw up a tangle of abstract words in long, complex sentences.

Some struggle because they are seized by the idea that good writing must be free of the kind of errors that only a grammarian can explain. They see their own writing less as a vehicle for exploring and communicating their ideas than as a minefield of potential errors. They creep from word to word, concerned less with their readers' understanding than with their own survival. But correctness is not clarity, and when we focus obsessively or exclusively on the former, we can end up sacrificing the latter. We'll take up this matter in Part One.

Some freeze up, especially when they are learning to think and write in an unfamiliar setting or context: a new class, a new field, a new profession. As we struggle to master new ideas, most of us write worse than we do when we write about things we understand better. If that sounds familiar, take heart: you will write more clearly when you more fully understand what you are writing about.

But the biggest reason most of us write unclearly is that we don't know when readers are likely to find our writing unclear, much less why. Our own writing always seems clearer to us than it does to our readers because when we read it, we respond less to the words on the page or screen than to the thoughts in our own heads: we read into it what we want them to get out of it. We see what we wanted to say, and we blame our readers for not understanding us as well as we understand (or think we understand) ourselves.

In all of this, of course, is a great irony: we are likely to confuse others when we write about a subject that confuses us. But when we ourselves are confused by

something written in an inaccessible style, we too easily assume that its complexity is justified by the complexity and profundity of its ideas. So we try to imitate it, making our already confused writing even worse. Sadder still, some of us become acclimated to that style, learning not only to read it but also to write it, thus inflicting it in turn on our own readers.

Parts Two and Three present principles—not rules—that you can follow to escape these traps. Once you know what features of a sentence lead readers to find one dense or confusing and another clear and direct, you can use this knowledge to serve your readers better. You can also use it to serve yourself: when you encounter difficult writing in your own reading, you will be able to untangle it so that you can grasp (or at least guess at) its meaning.

As important as clarity is, though, some occasions call for more:

The value of our shared reward will and must be measured by the joyful peace which will triumph, because the common humanity that bonds both black and white into one human race, will have said to each one of us that we shall all live like the children of paradise.

Thus shall we live, because we will have created a society which recognises that all people are born equal, with each entitled in equal measure to life, liberty, prosperity, human rights and good governance.

—Nelson Mandela, Nobel Lecture, December 10, 1993

Few of us will be called upon to deliver a Nobel lecture, but even on less lofty occasions, some of us take pleasure in crafting our writing so that it is not just clear but graceful. You will find suggestions in Part Four.

## How to Use This Book

Here are some suggestions to help you get the most out of this book:

- This book is not a grammar book, but you will need some basic knowledge of grammar to understand its principles. Most of the grammar terms used in the book are defined in either the text or the glossary. Be sure you know at least these: *subject*, *verb*, *noun*, *active*, *passive*, *clause*, and *phrase*.
- If you are using this book for a class, work as much as you can with your fellow students. Discuss the lessons and exercises. Share and comment on one another's writing. Learn from one another.
- If you are using this book on your own, go slowly. Take the lessons a few pages at a time. Do the exercises. Edit someone else's writing. Then edit something you wrote yourself a few weeks ago, then something you wrote that day.
- Understand that as you try to apply the book's principles, you may write more slowly. That's natural, and it passes.

- Finally, remember that the book's principles have less to do with drafting than with revision. The main theme of this book is that a clear style comes from making sound choices in the service of your readers. But if you try to think about all those choices *as you draft*, you may never finish. Worse, you could find yourself paralyzed and unable to write at all. There's a term for that condition: writer's block. Most experienced writers like to get something down on paper or up on the screen as fast as they can, in whatever form they can. Then as they revise that first draft into something clearer, they begin to understand their ideas better. And when they understand their ideas better, they express them more clearly, and the more clearly they express them, the better they understand them, and so it goes until they run out of energy, interest, or time. For a fortunate few, that moment comes weeks, months, or even years after they begin. For most of us, though, the deadline is closer to tomorrow morning. And so we have to settle for prose that is less than perfect but as good as we can make it in the time we have.

Here's the gist: when you draft, concentrate first on getting your ideas into words. Then use the principles here both to help you refine your ideas and to identify and quickly revise those sentences and passages likely to be more difficult for your readers than they need to be.

Many years ago, the great critic and journalist H. L. Mencken wrote this warning to anyone who would dare write a book on style:

With precious few exceptions, all the books on style in English are by writers quite unable to write. The subject, indeed, seems to exercise a special and dreadful fascination over school ma'ams, bucolic college professors, and other such pseudoliterates. . . . Their central aim, of course, is to reduce the whole thing to a series of simple rules—the overmastering passion of their melancholy order, at all times and everywhere.

—“The Fringes of Lovely Letters”

Mencken was right: no one learns to write well by rule, especially those who cannot see or feel or think. But many people *do* see clearly, feel deeply, and think carefully but still cannot write sentences that make their thoughts, feelings, and visions clear to others. And the more clearly we write, the more clearly we see and feel and think. Rules help no one do that, but some principles can.

Here they are.

PART ONE

---

# Style as Choice

*English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant,  
but not ostentatious . . .*

—SAMUEL JOHNSON



# Lesson 1

## Correctness and Style

*Established custom, in speaking and writing, is the standard to which we must at last resort for determining every controverted point in language and style.*

—HUGH BLAIR

To careful writers, nothing is more important than choice, for choice is what allows them to express themselves clearly and precisely. Which of these sentences would you choose to give to your readers?

A lack of sufficient funding was the cause of the program's failure.

The program failed because it was underfunded.

Both are grammatically correct, but most of us would choose the second because it feels more direct.

It is good to write correctly, but correctness in writing is not the highest good. If you obsess over every rule you can find in a handbook, you deny yourself the freedom you need to write quickly and clearly. That's why we're addressing correctness now, before we turn to clarity: to put it where it belongs—behind us.

### The Authority of Standard English

Some try to stay safe by memorizing and following dozens of alleged “rules” of correct grammar and usage. You could, for instance, adopt a worst-case policy: obey all the rules all the time because eventually, someone will criticize you for something—for beginning a sentence with *and* or ending it with *up*. But if you try to obey all the rules all the time, you risk tying yourself in knots.

The alternative to blind obedience is selective observance. But then you have to decide which rules to observe and which to ignore. If you don't follow a rule you should, you risk being labeled ignorant, uneducated, or worse. And if you choose to ignore a rule for sound reasons, you may encounter someone who, infatuated with “good” grammar, sees your split infinitive as an unmistakable sign of a more general social decay. If you want to avoid being accused of “lacking standards” but refuse to submit to whatever “rule” someone can dredge up from ninth-grade English, you have to know more about these rules than the rule-mongers do.

For that, you need to know something about the authority of Standard English, the variety of English you are expected to use when you write formal papers and professional documents. (It has national variants, but for our purposes, it is enough to know that there is a standard that's expected in most academic and professional contexts.)

Opinion is split on Standard English's social role. Some see Standard English as just another device to stigmatize the language of marginalized and disenfranchised groups and thereby suppress their social and political aspirations. Others hold that Standard English, as elaborated and refined by generations of writers and grammarians, is the best of all possible Englishes. Both views contain elements of truth.

Critics of Standard English rightly note that, for centuries, those in power have used grammatical "error" to screen out those unwilling or unable to acquire the habits of the schooled middle class. But these critics are wrong to claim that those rules were *devised* for that end. Standard forms of a language originate in accidents of geography and economic power. When a language has different regional dialects, that of the most powerful speakers usually comes to be considered the most prestigious and "correct."

Thus if Edinburgh rather than London had become the center of Britain's economic, political, and literary life, we would speak and write less like Shakespeare and more like the Scottish poet Robert Burns:

A ye wha are sae guid yourself	All you who are so good yourselves
Sae pious and sae holy,	So pious and so holy,
Ye've nought to do but mark	You've nothing to do but talk
and tell	about
Your neebours' fauts and folly!	Your neighbors' faults and folly!

Conservatives, on the other hand, are right that many rules of Standard English originated in efficient expression and that its use by the best writers over centuries has expanded and honed its resources. But they are wrong to claim on these grounds that Standard English must be socially, intellectually, and even morally superior to other allegedly debased varieties of English.

## Here's the Point

Those determined to discriminate will seize on any difference. And since language seems to directly reflect the quality of our minds, it's easy for those inclined to look down on others to think that grammatical "errors" indicate intellectual or moral deficiency. That belief is not just factually wrong; in a democracy, it is also socially destructive. Yet even if both history and logic attest to the once-respectable *ain't*, so great is the power of social convention that we avoid it, at least in our academic and professional writing.

## Three Kinds of Rules

That false association between correctness and superiority has been encouraged by generations of grammarians who, in their zeal to codify “good” English, have confused three kinds of “rules.”

### Real Rules

Real rules define English’s *grammar*, the intricate system of rules that determine how words can be combined into English sentences. Subjects typically precede verbs: *I see you*, not *See I you*. Articles must precede nouns: *the book*, not *book the*. More complexly, adjectives must appear in a certain order: it’s the *little red hen*, not the *red little hen*. There are many others, and linguists are still discovering them. Those born into English don’t think about these rules at all, and they violate them only when tired or distracted. In fact, if a speaker born into English does have to think about a real rule, it means the rule itself is changing as the language evolves.

### Social Rules

These social rules concern not *grammar*, strictly speaking, but *usage*: they define “proper” ways of speaking and writing and distinguish Standard English from other varieties. For example, *He don’t have no money* is a grammatical English sentence, but its violation of two social rules—the nonstandard inflection of the helping verb *do* and the double negative—disqualifies it as Standard English. Writers with a strong command of Standard English think about its social rules mainly when they notice others violating them or when they themselves intentionally violate them for effect.

### Invented Rules

Finally, there’s a handful of invented rules that some grammarians think we all *should* observe. Like social rules, these invented rules are rules of usage, but they are more artificial and more brittle. They are the rules that the grammar police love to enforce and that too many educated writers obsess over. Most date from the last half of the eighteenth century:

Don’t split infinitives, as in *to quietly leave*.

Don’t end a sentence with a preposition, as in *something you put up with*.

A few date from the twentieth century:

Don’t use *hopefully* for *I hope*, as in ***Hopefully***, *it won’t rain*.

Don’t use *which* for *that*, as in *a car which I sold*.

For hundreds of years, grammarians have condemned writers for violating such rules, and for just as long, the best writers have ignored them (both the rules and the grammarians). Which is lucky for the grammarians, because if writers did obey all the rules, the grammarians would have to invent new ones—or find

another line of work. To be sure, even the best writers commit occasional errors, but just knowing these three types of rules will help you put those errors into perspective. The standard for what is or is not an error must be the unself-conscious consensus of the most capable writers and their most competent readers.

We can sort most invented rules into two groups: *folklore* and *elegant options*. Folklore is usually ignored by competent, unself-conscious writers, without objection from their readers. You can ignore those rules too, unless you're writing in a setting where correctness is what matters most.

Elegant options are invented rules that complement the real rules of grammar and the social rules of usage. With real rules, most readers do not notice when you observe them, but does notice when you violates them (like that). With elegant options, it is the reverse: few readers notice when you violate them, but some notice when you observe them because doing so adds a bit of polish to your writing.

## Invented Rules: Folklore

These rules include those that most careful readers and writers ignore. You may not yet have had some of them inflicted on you, but chances are that you will. In what follows, the quotations that illustrate “violations” of these rules are from writers of considerable intellectual and scholarly stature or from writers who, on matters of usage, are reliable conservatives (some are both). A check mark indicates acceptable Standard English, despite what some grammarians claim.

### “Don’t begin sentences with *and* or *but*.”

This passage ignores the “rule” twice:

- ✓ **But**, it will be asked, is tact not an individual gift, therefore highly variable in its choices? **And** if that is so, what guidance can a manual offer, other than that of its author’s prejudices—mere impressionism?

—Wilson Follett, *Modern American Usage: A Guide*, edited  
and completed by Jacques Barzun et al.

Some inexperienced writers do begin too many sentences with *and*, but that is an error not in grammar but of style.

Some insecure writers also think they should not begin sentences with *because*. Allegedly not this:

- ✓ **Because** we have access to so much historical fact, today we know a good deal about changes within the humanities which were not apparent to those of any age much before our own and which the individual scholar must constantly reflect on.

—Walter Ong, S. J., “The Expanding Humanities and the  
Individual Scholar,” *Publication of the Modern Language Association*

This bit of folklore probably stems from a schoolhouse restriction intended to discourage sentence fragments in responses to prompts:

Why did the dialect of London become Standard English?

**Because** London was the economic and political center of Great Britain.

## Quick Tip

At best, this rule about *because* reflects a small truth of style. As you will see in Lesson 4, readers prefer sentences to begin with information they know and to proceed to information they don't. But subordinate clauses beginning with *because* usually convey new information, and so putting one at the beginning of a sentence can be mildly awkward. To begin a sentence with a clause expressing familiar information about causation, use *since* rather than *because*, because *since* implies that the reader already knows what's in the clause:

- ✓ **Since** our language seems to reflect our quality of mind, it is easy for those inclined to look down on others to think that grammatical "errors" indicate mental or moral deficiency.

There are exceptions to this principle, but it's generally sound.

## "Use the relative pronoun *that*—not *which*—for restrictive clauses."

Allegedly not this:

- ✓ Next is a typical situation **which** a practiced writer corrects "for style" virtually by reflex action.

—Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct*

Yet just a few sentences before, Barzun himself (one of our most eminent intellectual historians and critics of style) had asserted:

- | Us[e] *that* with defining [i.e., restrictive] clauses except when stylistic reasons interpose.

In that earlier sentence, no such reasons interpose: Barzun's own sense of style simply led him to prefer *which*.

This "rule" is relatively new. It first appeared in 1906 in Henry and Francis Fowler's *The King's English*. The Fowlers thought the random variation between *that* and *which* to begin a restrictive clause was messy, so they just asserted that henceforth writers should (with some exceptions) limit *which* to nonrestrictive clauses. A nonrestrictive clause modifies a noun naming a referent that you can identify unambiguously without the information in that clause. For example:

- | ✓ The company ended its first bankruptcy, **which** it had filed in 2012.

A company can have only one first bankruptcy, so we can unambiguously identify the bankruptcy without the filing date in the following *which* clause. We call that clause *nonrestrictive* because it does not further “restrict” or identify what the noun names. In that context, we put a comma before the modifying clause and begin it with *which*. This rule is based on historical and contemporary usage.

But the Fowlers sought to limit *which* to nonrestrictive clauses only. For restrictive clauses, they prescribed *that*. For example:

- ✓ Their boutique only sells clothing **that** [*not which*] is made from sustainably-sourced materials.

Since the relative clause in this sentence (*that . . . materials*) limits or “restricts” the meaning of *clothing*, it should, according to the Fowlers, begin with *that*. (For another allegedly incorrect *which*, see the passage by Walter Ong on p. 9.)

Francis died in 1918, but Henry continued the family tradition with his 1926 *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. In that landmark work, he discussed the finer points of *which* and *that* and then made this wistful observation:

- Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers.

There is no reason not to follow the Fowlers’ advice, but you have to trust your ear. For example, you might sometimes choose a *which* when it’s within a word or two of a *that* to avoid the awkward sound of two *thats* close together:

- ✓ We all have **that** one rule **that** we will not give up.
- ✓ We all have **that** one rule **which** we will not give up.

**“Use *fewer* with nouns you count, *less* with nouns you cannot.”**

Allegedly not this:

- ✓ I can remember no **less** than five occasions when the correspondence columns of *The Times* rocked with volleys of letters . . .

—Noel Gilroy Annan, Lord Annan, “The Life of the Mind in British Universities Today,” *American Council of Learned Societies Newsletter*

No one uses *fewer* with mass nouns (*fewer dirt*) but educated writers often use *less* with countable plural nouns (*less resources*).

**“Use *since* and *while* to refer only to time, not to mean *because* or *although*.”**

Most careful writers use *since* with a meaning close to *because* but, as mentioned above, with an added sense of “What follows I assume you already know”:

- ✓ **Since** asbestos is dangerous, it should be removed carefully.

Nor do most careful writers restrict *while* to its temporal sense (*We'll wait while you eat*). They use it also with a meaning close to "I assume you know what I state in this clause, but what I assert in the next will qualify it":

| ✓ **While** we agree on a date, we disagree about the place.

## Here's the Point

If writers whom we judge to be competent in Standard English regularly violate some alleged rule and most careful readers never notice, then the rule has no force. In those cases, it is not writers who should change their usage, but grammarians who should change their rules.

## Elegant Options

These next rules complement the real rules. Some are true invented rules; others are fading real rules that writers revive—in a sense reinvent—as options of style. Either way, you can use them as you like to make your writing sound more formal. Readers most notice elegant options not when they are broken or ignored but when they are followed.

### "Don't split infinitives."

Purists condemn Dwight Macdonald, himself a linguistic archconservative, for this sentence (boldface added in all the examples that follow):

| ✓ One wonders why Dr. Gove and his editors did not think of labeling *knowed* as substandard right where it occurs, and one suspects that they wanted **to slightly conceal** the fact . . .

—"The String Untuned," *New Yorker*

They would require

| they wanted **to conceal slightly** the fact . . .

Infinitives are split so often that when you avoid splitting one, careful readers may think you are trying to be especially correct, whether you are or not.

### "Don't end a sentence with a preposition."

Purists condemn Sir Ernest Gowers, editor of the second edition of Fowler's *Dictionary*, for this:

| ✓ The peculiarities of legal English are often used as a stick to beat the official **with**.

—*The Complete Plain Words*

They insist on this:

| stick **with which** to beat the official.

The first is correct; the second is more formal. (Again, see the Ong passage on p. 9.) Some conservatives apply this rule not only to sentences but to every clause.

### *“Use **whom** as the object of a verb or preposition.”*

This was once a real rule, but since *whom* is disappearing from the language, it is now an elegant option. Purists would condemn William Zinsser for this use of *who*:

- | ✓ Soon after you confront this matter of preserving your identity, another question will occur to you: “**Who** am I writing for?”

—*On Writing Well*

They would insist on

| another question will occur to you: “**Whom** am I writing for?”

or more formal yet, to avoid ending with a preposition,

| another question will occur to you: “For **whom** am I writing?”

### *“Use the singular with **none** and **any**.”*

*None* and *any* were originally singular, but today most writers use them as plural, so if you use them as singular, some readers will notice. The second sentence is slightly more formal than the first:

- | ✓ **None** of the reasons **are** sufficient to end the project.
- | ✓ **None** of the reasons **is** sufficient to end the project.

When you are under close scrutiny, you might choose to observe all these optional rules. Ordinarily, though, most careful writers follow them selectively, which is to say they are not rules at all but rather stylistic choices that create a formal tone. If you adopt the worst-case approach and observe them all, all the time, few readers will give you credit, but many will notice how formal, perhaps even stiff, your writing seems.

## Hobgoblins

For some unknown reason, a handful of items have become objects of particularly zealous abuse. There’s no explaining why; none of them actually interfere with clarity or concision.



### “Never use *like* for *as* or *as if*.”

Allegedly, not this:

- | ✓ These operations failed **like** the earlier ones did.

But this:

- | ✓ These operations failed **as** the earlier ones did.

*Like* became a subordinating conjunction in the eighteenth century when writers began to drop *as* from the conjunctive phrase *like as*, leaving just *like* as the conjunction. This process is called *elision*, and it is a common linguistic change. It is telling that when editing the second edition of Fowler’s *Dictionary* (the one favored by conservatives), Gowers deleted *like* for *as* from Fowler’s list of “Illiteracies” and moved it into the category of “Sturdy Indefensibles.”

### “Don’t use *hopefully* to mean ‘I hope.’”

Allegedly, not this:

- | ✓ Hopefully, it will not rain.

But this:

- | ✓ I hope that it will not rain.

This “rule” dates from the middle of the twentieth century. It has no basis in logic or grammar, as the allegedly incorrect use of *hopefully* parallels the usage of other words that no one complains about, words such as *candidly*, *frankly*, *sadly*, and *happily*:

- | ✓ Candidly, we may fail. (That is, *I am candid when I say we may fail*.)
- | ✓ Sadly, we must go. (That is, *I am sad when I say we must go*.)

### “Don’t use *finalize* to mean ‘finish’ or ‘complete.’”

*Finalize* doesn’t mean just “finish.” It means “to clean up the last few details,” a sense captured by no other word.

### “Don’t use *impact* as a verb but only as a noun.”

Some would object to this:

- | ✓ The survey impacted our strategy.

And insist on this:

- | ✓ The survey had an impact on our strategy.

*Impact* has been a verb for 400 years, but on some people, historical evidence has none.

“Don’t modify absolute words such as *perfect*, *unique*, *final*, or *complete* with *very*, *more*, *quite*, and so on.”

That rule would have deprived us of this familiar sentence:

| ✓ We the People of the United States, in order to form a **more perfect** union . . .

Even so, this rule is generally worth following.

“Never ever use *irregardless* for *regardless* or *irrespective*.”

However arbitrary this rule is, follow it. Use *irregardless* and some will judge you irredeemable.

## Some Words that Attract Special Attention

Some words are so often confused with others that careful readers are likely to note when you correctly distinguish them. Here are some:

**aggravate** means *to make worse*. Fastidious readers may object if you use it to mean *annoy*.

**anticipate** means *to prepare for a contingency*. It does not mean just *expect*. You anticipate a question when you prepare its answer before it’s asked; if you know it’s coming but don’t prepare, you only expect it.

**anxious** means *uneasy* not *eager*. You’re eager to leave if you’re happy to go. You’re anxious about leaving if it makes you nervous.

**blackmail** means *to extort by threatening to reveal damaging information*. It does not mean simply *coerce*. One country cannot blackmail another with nuclear weapons when it only threatens to use them.

**comprise** means *to include all parts in a single unit*. It is not synonymous with *compose* or *constitute*. The alphabet is not comprised by its letters; it comprises them. Letters constitute the alphabet, which is thus constituted by them.

**continuous** means *without interruption*. It is not synonymous with *continual*, which means an activity continued through time, with interruptions. If you continuously interrupt someone, that person will never say a word because your interruption will never stop. If you continually interrupt, you let the other person finish a sentence from time to time.

**disinterested** means *neutral*. It does not mean *uninterested*. A judge should be disinterested in the outcome of a case but not uninterested in it. (Incidentally, the original meaning of *disinterested* was *to be uninterested*.)

**enormity** means a *horrible wrong*. It does not mean *enormousness*. In private, a belch might be enormous, but at a state funeral, it would also be an enormity.

**flaunt** means *to display conspicuously*. It is not synonymous with *flout*, which means *to scorn a rule or standard*. If you choose to scorn this distinction, you would not flout your flaunting it but flaunt your flouting it.

**fortuitous** means *by chance*. It does not mean *fortunate*. You are fortunate when you fortuitously pick the right number in the lottery.

*fulsome* means *sickeningly excessive*. It does not mean just *much*. We all enjoy praise, except when it becomes fulsome.

*notorious* means *known for bad behavior*. It does not mean *famous*. Frank Sinatra was a famous singer but a notorious bully.

*simplistic* does not mean merely *simple*. It means *overly simple* and is usually used in a pejorative sense. A simple solution to a problem is often best; a simplistic solution never is.

These days, many readers won't care about these distinctions, but some will. And they may be just those whose judgment carries weight when it matters most.

On the other hand, you are simply expected as an educated writer to correctly distinguish *imply* and *infer*, *principal* and *principle*, *accept* and *except*, *capital* and *capitol*, *affect* and *effect*, *proceed* and *precede*, *discrete* and *discreet*. Most careful readers also notice when a Latinate or Greek plural noun is used as a singular, so you will want to keep these straight, too:

<b>Singular</b>	datum	criterion	medium	stratum	phenomenon
<b>Plural</b>	data	criteria	media	strata	phenomena

## Here's the Point

You can't predict good grammar or correct usage by logic or general rule. You have to learn the rules one by one and accept the fact that many of them are arbitrary and idiosyncratic.

## Gender and Style

Language changes as society changes, and today we're experiencing major shifts in how we think about gender. Usages that were once unremarkable now seem outdated or even sexist, and new usages that even a few years ago would have been rejected are becoming more accepted—in some circles, settings, and contexts. What does this mean for you? Well, how you choose to handle gender in your writing is something your readers will notice, and it is something on which they will judge not just your ideas but also your values, politics, and even character. It's a complicated landscape. Here are some ways to navigate it.

### Gender-Specific Nouns

To avoid seeming, at best, hopelessly old-fashioned, you should generally steer clear of gender-specific nouns. Here are two rules of thumb:

- Avoid using nouns gendered as feminine when their counterparts are not explicitly gendered masculine. Use the formerly masculine noun for all genders or find an alternative. A woman who tells jokes for a living is not

a *comedienne* but a *comedian* or a *comic*. A woman throwing a party is not its *hostess* but its *host*. Be especially careful with words that refer to traditionally female jobs or professions: a woman who keeps you safe and comfortable on an airplane is not a *stewardess* but a *flight attendant*. But when both words in a pair are explicitly gendered, they can be acceptable: a female ruler of a kingdom is still its *queen* and a male ruler its *king*.

- Avoid using nouns formed with *-man* when the gender of the person referred to is irrelevant, and don't simply substitute *-woman* or *-person* for *-man* unless you want to draw attention to that choice. A professor who leads a department is its *chair*, not its *chairman* or *chairwoman* or *chairperson*. Similarly, a person working in law enforcement is a *police officer*.

## Pronouns and Gender: The Problem of Agreement

It's fairly easy to find alternatives to gender-specific nouns because new nouns can always be borrowed or invented. Pronouns, though, are different because, like articles (*the, a, an*) and conjunctions (*and, but, or*), they are part of the structure of the language. A new noun just gets added to the language's potentially endless inventory of nouns; it doesn't affect anything else. A new pronoun would change the language itself, so the barriers to its acceptance are far greater. That difference makes the issue of gendered pronouns trickier than the issue of gendered nouns. Here's how:

Just as we expect verbs to agree with their subjects, so we expect pronouns to agree in number with their referents. But that raises two problems.

First, do we use a singular or plural pronoun when referring to a noun that is singular in grammar but plural in meaning? Some writers use a singular verb and pronoun when the group acts as a single entity:

| ✓ The **committee has** met but has not yet made **its** decision.

But they use a plural verb and pronoun when its members act individually:

| ✓ The **faculty have** the memo, but not all of **them** have read it.

These days plurals are irregularly used in both senses (but the plural is the rule in British English).

Second, what pronoun do we use to refer to singular common nouns that signal no gender, such as *teacher, doctor, or student*, or to indefinite pronouns that are singular in form but plural in meaning, such as *someone, anyone, or everyone*? We casually use *they*:

| Every **student** knows that to get good grades, **they** must take **their** classes seriously. If **someone** won't do **their** work, it is very hard for **them** to succeed.

Eminent writers have used *they* in this generic sense since at least the fourteenth century. In formal writing, though, many writers and readers, especially those with an attachment to tradition, still want a singular pronoun. The convention was

once that a feminine third-person singular pronoun (*she, her, hers*) could be used only when its referent was unambiguously female—*The mermaid waved her tail*—and that the masculine pronoun (*he, him, his*) should be used in all other cases. But that rule leads to sentences that today seem socially and stylistically awkward:

Every **student** knows that to get good grades, **he** must take **his** classes seriously.  
If **someone** won't do **his** work, it is very hard for **him** to succeed.

If, however, we hesitate in formal writing to use *they* as a singular pronoun, and we also reject *he* as biased, we are confronted with a delicate problem of style. The thing to remember is that we have choices.

## Pronouns and Gender: Inclusive Options

English may not (yet) have a universally accepted gender-neutral singular third-person pronoun, but it does offer good options to careful writers who want to write in an inclusive fashion. Here are four, in detail.

1. **Replace the gendered pronoun with another pronoun or with a noun.** In English, only third-person singular pronouns are explicitly gendered, and you can often simply replace them.

*Use both the masculine and feminine pronouns:* You can replace a masculine pronoun with the masculine and feminine pronouns together.

A careful **writer** will always consider the needs of **his** readers.

- ✓ A careful **writer** will always consider the needs of **his or her** readers.

But it can be cumbersome if a sentence contains several pronouns. And this solution is not entirely inclusive, as some people identify as neither male nor female.

*Rephrase in the plural:* In English, plural pronouns are gender-neutral and can refer to categories or classes.

A **writer** should use gender-neutral language if **he** wants **his** readers to see **him** as modern and progressive.

- ✓ **Writers** should use gender-neutral language if **they** want **their** readers to see **them** as modern and progressive.

But since we usually expect abstractions to be singular, using the plural can sometimes change the meaning.

*Substitute the first-person plural pronoun:* In English, first-person pronouns are gender-neutral, and we can use them in their plural form generically.

A **writer** should use gender-neutral language if **he** wants **his** readers to see **him** as modern and progressive.

- ✓ **We** should use gender-neutral language if **we** want **our** readers to see **us** as modern and progressive.

But *we* can be ambiguous or sound too formal.

**Substitute the indefinite pronoun “one”:** This pronoun is also gender-neutral, so one may use it as well.

A **writer** should use gender-neutral language if **he** wants to seem modern and progressive.

- ✓ **One** should use gender-neutral language if **one** wants to seem modern and progressive.

But even more than *we*, *one* can sound stiff.

**Repeat the noun:** In English, nouns aren’t gendered, so you can avoid pronouns by repeating those nouns.

If a **writer** wants to seem modern and progressive, **he** should use gender-neutral language.

- ✓ If a **writer** wants to seem modern and progressive, **the writer** should use gender-neutral language.

But repeating a noun, especially more than once, can sound stiff.

2. **Cut a gendered pronoun when that doesn’t change the meaning.** You can sometimes replace a pronoun with another kind of word or cut it altogether.

**Replace a possessive pronoun with an article or other determiner:** If you want to use a singular count noun, you can replace a possessive pronoun with another determiner (italicized) such as an article or quantifier.

A **writer** can impress *his* **reader** by using gender-neutral language.

- ✓ A **writer** can impress *a* **reader** by using gender-neutral language.
- ✓ A **writer** can impress *each* **reader** by using gender-neutral language.

**Cut the pronoun:** If you use a plural noun, you can sometimes simply cut a redundant possessive.

- ✓ A **writer** can impress **readers** by using gender-neutral language.

But not all possessives are redundant. Compare these:

A passionate **writer** treasures **his books**.

A passionate **writer** treasures **books**.

3. **Avoid a gendered pronoun by choosing a different grammatical construction.**

If you can’t replace or cut a gendered pronoun, you will have to make a more ambitious revision. In particular, look for opportunities to eliminate a gendered pronoun that is the subject of a subordinate or main clause, as in these next sentences (pronouns and referents boldfaced, subordinate clauses italicized):

A **writer** should use gender-neutral language if *he wants to seem modern and progressive*.

If *a writer wants to seem modern and progressive*, **he** should use gender-neutral language.

But be careful with these next options, because when you eliminate subjects of sentences and clauses, you risk cutting “doers” or characters and making your writing less clear (see Lesson 2 and 3).

**Rephrase using a relative clause:** You can replace a subordinate clause with a relative clause (underlined) introduced by *who*, *whom*, or *whose*.

- ✓ A **writer** who wants to seem modern and progressive should use gender-neutral language.

**Rephrase using a gerund or nominalization:** You can use a gerund (a word of the form verb+ing that acts as a noun) or nominalization (a verb turned into a noun) to avoid repeating a “doer” or to cut it entirely (main subject underlined, gerund and nominalization italicized).

- ✓ Using gender-neutral language makes a **writer** seem modern and progressive.
- ✓ The use of gender-neutral language makes a **writer** seem modern and progressive.

**Rephrase using the passive voice:** You can also switch from the active to the passive voice (passive verb italicized).

- ✓ Gender-neutral language should *be used* if a **writer** wants to seem modern and progressive.

**Rephrase using an infinitive phrase:** You can use an infinitive phrase (underlined).

- ✓ To seem modern and progressive, a **writer** should use gender-neutral language.

But watch out for dangling modifiers (see p. 141). In that last sentence, the modifier doesn’t dangle because the infinitive phrase modifies *writer*, the subject of the main clause. In this one, it does:

To seem modern and progressive, gender-neutral language should be used.

It is the *writer* (not *gender-neutral language*) who wants to seem modern and progressive.

4. **Alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns.** Finally, you can alternate between *he* and *she*, as this book does. Some readers find this solution stylistically intrusive, but it is an option that is becoming familiar.

## Non-Binary Pronouns

We’ve shown you several ways to write in an inclusive or gender-neutral fashion. But there is still another issue: how to refer to people who identify as neither male or female, or as non-binary? We could adopt a new system of English pronouns, and several have been proposed over the last few decades. But none of those systems, at least to date, has been widely accepted by English speakers.

An increasingly popular alternative is to use the singular *they* as a non-binary pronoun, to refer not just to a referent whose gender is unknown but to individuals known to identify as non-binary:

- ✓ Casey informed **their** teacher that **they** preferred neither of the traditional third-person singular pronouns.

In 2016, the American Dialect Society named *they* used in this way as its “Word of the Year,” and it is now being recognized even by style guides that still balk at the use of *they* with indefinite referents, at least in formal contexts. Ultimately, it is less a matter of correctness or even style than of ethics, and we’ll consider it again in Lesson 11.

## The Future

What will the future bring? It’s hard to know. One of the new pronoun systems might succeed in achieving a critical mass of acceptance and be integrated into the language. Such attempts at linguistic engineering, however, are rarely successful. But if engineering doesn’t work, evolution certainly will. The one constant with language is that it changes to meet its users’ needs, offering new choices in response to new social realities. But whatever the future, we have choices now, and from the perspective of style, that’s what matters.

## Summing Up

We must write correctly, but if in defining correctness we ignore the difference between fact and folklore, we risk overlooking what is really important—the choices that make our writing dense and wordy or clear and concise. We are not precise merely because we get right *which* and *that* and avoid *finalize* and *hopefully*. Many who obsess over such details are oblivious to this more serious kind of problem:

Too precise a specification of information processing requirements incurs the risk of overestimation resulting in unused capacity or inefficient use of costly resources or of underestimation leading to ineffectiveness or other inefficiencies.

That means:

- ✓ When you specify too precisely the resources you need to process information, you may overestimate. If you do, you risk having more capacity than you need or using costly resources inefficiently.

Both sentences are grammatically correct, but who would choose the first over the second?

It’s possible that those who observe all the rules all the time do so not because they want to protect the integrity of the language but because they want to assert their personal style. Some of us are straightforward and plain speaking; others take pleasure in a touch of formality or fastidious “class.” We should not scorn this impulse, so long as it is not a pretext for social discrimination and so long as it remains subordinated to the more important matters to which we now turn: the choices that define not correctness but clarity and grace.



*This page is intentionally left blank*

## PART TWO

---

# Clarity

*Everything that can be thought at all  
can be thought clearly.  
Everything that can be said can be said clearly.*  
—LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

*It takes less time to learn to write nobly than to  
learn to write lightly and straightforwardly.*  
—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

# Lesson 2

## Actions

*Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *HAMLET*, 3.2

We have words enough to praise writing we like—*clear, direct, concise*—and more than enough to abuse writing we don't: *unclear, indirect, abstract, dense, complex*. We can use those words to distinguish these two sentences:

**1a.** The cause of our schools' failure at teaching basic skills is not understanding the influence of cultural background on learning.

**1b.** Our schools have failed to teach basic skills because they do not understand how cultural background influences the way a child learns.

Most of us would call **1a** too complex, **1b** clearer and more direct. But those words don't refer to anything *in* those sentences; they describe how those sentences make us *feel*. When we say that **1a** is unclear, we mean that *we* have a hard time understanding it; we say it's dense when *we* struggle to read it.

The problem is to understand what in those two sentences makes readers feel as they do. Only then can you know when your readers will think your writing needs revising and, when it does, what to do. This lesson's basic insight is this: in general, the sentences readers find clear are those that tell good stories. When you understand what counts as a well-told story, you will know when your readers are likely to think your writing needs revising and then what to do.

To grasp this lesson and the next three, you must be able to identify *whole subjects, simple subjects, and verbs*. Every sentence or clause has two parts: the subject and the predicate. The whole subject is the noun phrase, or full unit of information, that serves as that subject. The simple subject is the noun in that unit that everything else in it refers to or modifies. (When you see references to the *subject* of a sentence, they usually mean the simple subject.) The verb is the action word or linking word in the predicate that agrees with the subject. If you can't easily identify these three elements, see the Glossary.

## Telling Stories: Characters and Actions

This story has a problem:

**2a.** Once upon a time, a walk through the woods was taking place on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, when the Wolf's jump out from behind a tree occurred, causing her fright.

We prefer something closer to this:

✓ **2b.** Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, when the Wolf jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her.

Most readers think **2b** tells the story more clearly than **2a** because it follows two principles:

- The main characters are the subjects of verbs.
- Those verbs express specific actions.

### Principle of Clarity 1: Make Main Characters Subjects

Look at the subjects in **2a**. Whole subjects are underlined; simple subjects are italicized. Those simple subjects do not name the main characters (gold) in the story. Instead, they are actions expressed in abstract nouns, *walk* and *jump*:

**2a.** Once upon a time, a *walk through the woods* was taking place on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, when the *Wolf's jump* out from behind a tree occurred, causing her fright.

The whole subject of the verb *occurred* does have a character in it: the possessive noun *Wolf's*. But the Wolf is not *the* subject (that is, the simple subject). That character appears only as a modifier of the simple subject *jump*.

Contrast the subjects in **2a** with those in **2b**, where the characters (gold) are also the subjects (again, whole subjects are underlined; simple subjects are italicized):

✓ **2b.** Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood was walking through the woods, when the *Wolf* jumped out from behind a tree and frightened her.

The simple subjects and main characters are now the same words:

#### SUBJECT/CHARACTER

Little Red Riding Hood

Wolf

#### VERB

was walking

jumped...frightened

Notice too that when simple subjects are characters, the whole subjects are also shorter: in that first subject, *Little Red Riding Hood*, they are the same. In the second, *the Wolf*, the whole subject only includes one additional word, the article *the*.

## Principle of Clarity 2: Make Important Actions Verbs

Now look at the verbs in **2a**: *was taking, occurred*. Notice how vague they are. The characters' actions (pink) are expressed not in those verbs (boldfaced) but in abstract nouns:

**2a.** Once upon a time, a **walk** through the woods **was taking place** on the part of Little Red Riding Hood, when the Wolf's **jump** out from behind a tree **occurred**, causing her **fright**.

The story isn't about *taking place* and *occurring* but about *walking* and *jumping* and *frightening*. In **2b**, the verbs name these important story actions:

✓ **2b.** Once upon a time, Little Red Riding Hood **was walking** through the woods, when the Wolf **jumped** out from behind a tree and **frightened** her.

Consider these two principles together. In **2a**, the characters are not named by the subjects, and the important actions are not expressed as verbs:

### SUBJECT

a **walk** through the woods

the **Wolf's jump** out from behind a tree

### VERB

**was taking place**

**occurred**

In **2b**, the characters do line up with subjects, and those important actions are expressed as verbs (notice that gold words are now also italicized, and pink words are now also boldfaced):

### SUBJECT/CHARACTER

**Little Red Riding Hood**

the **Wolf**

### VERB

**was walking**

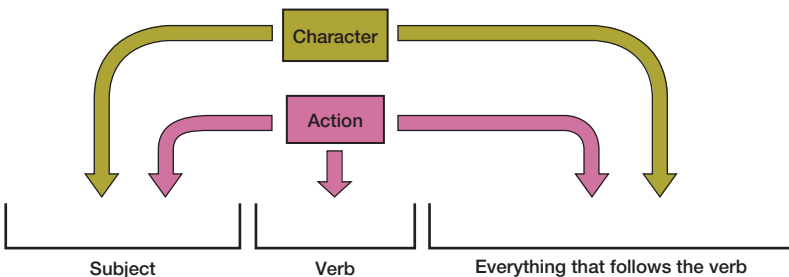
**jumped ... frightened**

That is why most readers find **2b** clearer than **2a**.

You can picture these principles graphically. In English sentences, the subject almost always comes before the verb, like this:



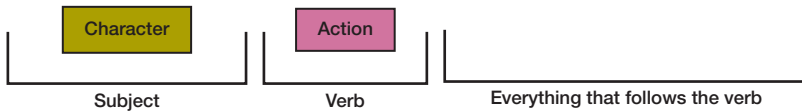
You can think of these subject and verb positions as fixed grammatical "slots." Characters and actions, on the other hand, can appear almost anywhere. You can think of them as "story" elements that writers can move around:



But readers prefer characters to align with subjects and actions with verbs. So when you are reviewing your writing, take note if you come across a sentence structured like this, where the character is not in the subject slot or the action is not in the verb slot:



Consider rearranging it so that those story elements appear like this:



Keep in mind that readers want to see characters not just *in* the (whole) subject, but *as* the (simple) subject. When you frustrate those expectations, you make readers work harder than necessary.

## Here's the Point

In **2a**, the sentence that seems wordy and indirect, the two main characters, Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, are *not* subjects, and their actions—walking, jumping, and frightening—are *not* verbs. In **2b**, the more direct sentence, those two main characters *are* subjects and their main actions *are* verbs. That's why we prefer **2b**.

## Fairy Tales and “Serious” Writing

Writing in college or on the job may seem distant from fairy tales like “Little Red Riding Hood.” But it's not, because in every kind of writing, most sentences still tell stories. That is, they are still about characters doing things. Compare these two:

- 3a. Mayoral support for the school consolidation proposal was based on a belief that it could yield significant cost reductions without having an adverse effect on student standardized test performance.
- ✓ 3b. The mayor supported the proposal to consolidate schools because she believed that it could significantly reduce costs without adversely affecting students' performance on standardized tests.

We can analyze those sentences as we did the ones about Little Red Riding Hood.

Sentence **3a** feels dense for two reasons. First, its characters (gold)—the *mayor*, the *proposal*, *students*—are not subjects. Its whole subject (underlined) contains two

of these characters, but neither is the simple subject (*italicized*). Instead, that simple subject is the abstraction *support*:

3a. *Mayoral support* for the school consolidation *proposal* was based on a belief that *it* could yield significant cost reductions without having an adverse effect on *student* standardized test performance.

Second, the important actions (pink) in the sentence are not verbs (boldfaced) but abstract nouns:

3a. Mayoral *support* for the school *consolidation* proposal **was based on** a *belief* that it **could yield** significant cost *reductions* without **having** an adverse *effect* on student standardized test *performance*.

Notice also how long and complex is the whole subject of 3a and how little meaning is expressed by its main verb *was based on*:

### WHOLE SUBJECT

### VERB

Mayoral support for the school consolidation proposal    was based on

Readers think 3b is clearer for two reasons: the simple subjects (*italicized*) of the sentence and its dependent clauses are characters (gold), and its actions (pink), with only one exception, are verbs (boldfaced):

✓ 3b. *The mayor* **supported** the *proposal* to *consolidate* schools because *she* **believed** that *it* **could** significantly *reduce* costs without adversely *affecting* *students'* *performance* on standardized tests.

Again, when we make characters the simple subjects, the whole subjects (*underlined*) also become short and concrete. (If you are wondering why we are treating *proposal* as a character or why we did not change *performance* into a verb, see pp. 37–38.)

## A Simple Test for Clarity

You can use this connection between fairy tales and serious writing to test how clear a sentence is likely to seem to readers. Just plug the subject and the verb into this template:

Once upon a time, there was [*subject*], and one day he/she/it [**verb**].

If you get a good story, your sentence will probably seem clear:

2b. Once upon a time, there was *Little Red Riding Hood*, and one day she **was walking**...

3b. Once upon a time, there was *the mayor*, and one day she **supported**...

These sentences tell good stories because we can picture the character named by the subject doing the action expressed by the verb. But if you get something

that doesn't sound like a story at all, the sentence could probably be clearer. Here is that test using **2a** and **3a**, first with simple subjects and then with whole subjects:

**2a.** Once upon a time, there was a walk, and one day it **was taking place**...

**3a.** Once upon a time, there was support, and one day it **was based on**...

**2a.** Once upon a time, there was a walk through the woods, and one day it **was taking place**...

**3a.** Once upon a time, there was mayoral support for the school consolidation proposal, and one day it **was based on**...

It is hard for readers to picture any of these stories, and that is why those sentences seem unclear.

In the rest of this lesson, we look in more detail at verbs and actions; in the next, at subjects and characters.

## Finding Actions in a Sentence

Our first principle is this: a sentence seems clear when its important actions are in verbs. Look at how sentences **4a** and **4b** express their actions. In **4a**, most of the actions (pink) are not verbs (boldfaced) but nouns:

**4a.** Our lack of data **prevented** evaluation of UN actions in targeting funds to areas most in need of assistance.

In **4b**, on the other hand, most of the actions are verbs:

✓ **4b.** Because we lacked data, we could not **evaluate** whether the UN **had** targeted funds to areas that most **needed** assistance.

Readers will think your writing is dense if you use lots of abstract nouns, especially those derived from verbs and adjectives by adding suffixes such as *-tion*, *-ment*, and *-ance*, and especially when you use those abstract nouns as subjects.

A noun derived from a verb or adjective has a technical name: *nominalization*. The word illustrates its meaning: when we nominalize *nominalize*, we create the nominalization *nominalization*. Here are a few examples:

VERB → NOMINALIZATION	ADJECTIVE → NOMINALIZATION
discover → discovery	careless → carelessness
resist → resistance	different → difference
react → reaction	proficient → proficiency

We can also nominalize a verb by adding *-ing* (making it a gerund):

She flies → her flying

We sang → our singing



Some nominalizations and verbs are identical:

hope → hope      result → result      repair → repair

We **request** that you **review** the data.

Our **request** is that you **do** a **review** of the data.

(Some actions also hide out in adjectives: *It is applicable* → *it applies*. Some others: *indicative, dubious, argumentative, deserving*.)

No element of style more characterizes writing that feels dense, abstract, indirect, and difficult than lots of nominalizations, especially as the subjects of verbs.

## Here's the Point

In grade school, we learned that subjects *are* characters (or “doers”) and that verbs *are* actions. That's often true:

<b>subject</b>	<b>verb</b>	<b>object</b>
We	discussed	the problem.
<b>doer</b>	<b>action</b>	

But it is not true for this almost synonymous sentence:

<b>subject</b>	<b>verb</b>		
The problem	was	the topic	of our discussion.
		<b>doer</b>	<b>action</b>

We can move characters and actions around in a sentence, and subjects and verbs don't have to name any particular kind of thing at all. But when you match characters to subjects and actions to verbs in most of your sentences, readers are likely to think your prose is clear, direct, and readable.

## Exercise 2.1

If you aren't sure whether you can distinguish verbs, adjectives, and nominalizations, practice on the list below. Turn verbs and adjectives into nominalizations, and nominalizations into adjectives and verbs. Remember that some verbs and nominalizations have the same form:

Heavy rains **cause** flooding.

Heavy rains **are** a CAUSE of flooding.

analysis	believe	attempt	conclusion	evaluate
suggest	approach	comparison	define	discuss
expression	failure	intelligent	thorough	appearance
decrease	improve	increase	accuracy	careful
emphasize	explanation	description	clear	examine

## Exercise 2.2

Identify the subject, character, verb, and action in these pairs of sentences. The unclear sentence is first; the improved sentence follows. What do you notice about how characters and subjects, and actions and verbs, are aligned in each?

- 1a. There is opposition among many voters to nuclear power plants based on a belief in their threat to human health.
- 1b. Many voters oppose nuclear power plants because they believe that such plants threaten human health.
- 2a. Growth in the market for ebooks is driven by a preference of many readers for their convenience and portability.
- 2b. The market for ebooks has grown because many readers prefer their convenience and portability.
- 3a. There is a belief among some researchers that consumers' choices at fast food restaurants are healthier because there are postings of nutrition information in menus.
- 3b. Some researchers believe that consumers are choosing healthier foods at fast food restaurants because they are posting nutrition information in their menus.
- 4a. The design of the new roller coaster was more of a struggle for the engineers than had been their expectation.
- 4b. The engineers struggled more than they expected when designing the new roller coaster.
- 5a. Because the student's preparation for the exam was thorough, none of the questions on it were a surprise to her.
- 5b. Because the student prepared thoroughly for the exam, she was not surprised by any of the questions on it.

## Exercise 2.3

Create three sentences using verbs and adjectives from Exercise 2.1. Then rewrite them using the corresponding nominalizations (keep the meaning the same). For example, using *suggest*, *discuss*, and *careful*, write:

I **suggest** that we **discuss** the issue carefully.

Then rewrite that sentence into its nominalized form:

My **SUGGESTION** is that our **DISCUSSION** of the issue be done with CARE.

When you see how a clear sentence can be made unclear, you will better understand why it seemed clear in the first place.

## How to Revise: Characters and Actions

Writers tend to write unclearly when they are unsure about what they want to say or how to say it. But they also tend to write unclearly because they are too familiar with their own writing to judge accurately how readers will respond to it. So what can we do?

### The Problem of Familiarity

We first need to understand the problem. You've probably had this experience: you think you've written something good, but your reader thinks otherwise. You wonder whether that person is just being difficult, but you bite your tongue and try to fix it, even though you think it should already be clear to anyone who can read Dr. Seuss. That happens to most experienced writers. And almost always, their readers can see where their writing needs work better than they can.

Why are we so often right about the writing of others and so often wrong about our own? It is because we all read into our own writing what we want readers to get out of it. That explains why two readers can disagree about the clarity of the same piece of writing: the reader who is most familiar with its content will likely find it clearest. Both are right, because clarity is not a property of sentences but an impression of readers. It is in the eye of the beholder.

### A Procedure for Revising Sentences

Since we can't assume that readers' judgments of our sentences will match our own, we need a more objective way to look at our writing, a way that sidesteps our too-good understanding of it. You can use our two principles of clarity (make main characters subjects; make important actions verbs) to explain why your readers judge your prose as they do. But more important, you can also use those principles to identify and revise sentences that seem clear to you but might not to your readers. Revision is a three-step process: analyze, assess, rewrite.

#### 1. Analyze

- a. Ignoring short (up to four- or five-word) introductory phrases, underline the first seven or eight words in each sentence:

The automation of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations means the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

b. Then ask two questions:

- Did you underline any abstract nouns as simple subjects?

The automation of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations means the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

- Did you underline seven or eight words before getting to a verb?

The automation of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations [10 words] **means** the loss of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

If you answer *yes* to either, you should probably revise.

## 2. Assess

a. Decide who or what your main characters are (more about this in the next lesson):

The automation of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by **corporations** means the loss of jobs for many **blue-collar workers**.

b. Then look for the actions that those characters perform, especially actions hidden in nominalizations, those abstract nouns derived from verbs:

The **automation** of manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes by corporations means the **loss** of jobs for many blue-collar workers.

## 3. Rewrite

a. If the actions are nominalizations, make them verbs:

automation → automate      loss → lose

b. Make the characters the subjects of those verbs:

corporations automate      blue-collar workers lose

c. Rewrite the sentence with characters as subjects and actions as verbs, using subordinating conjunctions such as *because*, *if*, *when*, *although*, *why*, *how*, *whether*, or *that* to show relationships among ideas:

- ✓ Many blue-collar workers are losing their jobs *because* corporations are automating their manufacturing, assembly, and shipping processes.

## How to Revise: Nominalizations

You can quickly spot and revise five common patterns of nominalizations (nominalizations are capitalized).

**1. The nominalization is the subject of an empty verb such as *be*, *seems*, *has*, etc.:**

The *INTENTION* of the committee **is** to audit the records.

a. Change the nominalization to a verb:

INTENTION → **intend**

b. Find a character that would be the subject of that verb:

The intention of the **committee** is to audit the records.

c. Make that character the subject of the new verb:

- | ✓ The **committee** **intends** to audit the records.

## 2. The nominalization follows an empty verb:

- | The *reporter* **conducted** an INVESTIGATION of the matter.

a. Change the nominalization to a verb:

- | INVESTIGATION → **investigate**

b. Replace the empty verb with that new verb:

- | ✓ The **reporter** **investigated** the matter.

## 3. One nominalization is the subject of an empty verb and a second nominalization follows it:

- | Our *LOSS* in sales **was** a result of their *EXPANSION* of outlets.

a. Change the nominalizations into verbs:

- | LOSS → **lose**                      EXPANSION → **expand**

b. Identify the characters that would be the subjects of those verbs:

- | **Our** loss in sales was a result of **their** expansion of outlets.

c. Make those characters subjects of those verbs:

- | **we** **lose**                      **they** **expand**

d. Link the new clauses with a logical connection:

- To express simple cause: *because, since, when*
- To express conditional cause: *if, provided that, so long as*
- To contradict expected causes: *though, although, unless*

- |  |                                       |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| - <b>Our</b> <b>LOSS</b> in sales          | → <b>We</b> <b>lost</b> sales         |
| - was the result of                        | → because                             |
| - <b>their</b> <b>EXPANSION</b> of outlets | → <b>they</b> <b>expanded</b> outlets |

## 4. A nominalization follows *there is* or *there are*:

- | *There is* a *NEED* for our further *STUDY* of this problem.

a. Change the nominalization to a verb:

- | NEED → **need**                      STUDY → **study**

b. Identify the character that should be the subject of the verb:

- | There is a need for **our** further study of this problem.

c. Make that character the subject of the verb:

- | NEED → **we** **need**                      **our** STUDY → **we** **study**

- | ✓ **We** **need to study** this problem further.

## 5. Two or three nominalizations in a row are joined by prepositions:

We **did** a REVIEW of the EVOLUTION of the brain.

a. Turn the first nominalization into a verb:

REVIEW → **review**

b. Either leave the second nominalization as it is, or turn it into a verb in a clause beginning with *how* or *why*:

EVOLUTION of the brain → how the *brain* **evolved**

✓ We **reviewed** the EVOLUTION of the brain.

✓ We **reviewed** how the *brain* **evolved**.

### Quick Tip

When you revise a complicated sentence, you will likely have more than one character-action clause. Decide how the clauses fit together, then try out these patterns: *X because Y; Since X, Y; If X, then Y; Although X, Y; X and/but/so Y.*

## Some Benefits of Making Actions Verbs

When you consistently rely on verbs (boldfaced) to express important actions (pink), your readers benefit in many ways:

1. Your sentences are more concrete:

There **was** a directorial **decision** for program **expansion**.

✓ The director **decided to expand** the program.

2. Your sentences are more concise. When you use nominalizations, you have to add articles like *a* and *the* and prepositions such as *of*, *by*, and *in*. You don't need them when you use verbs and conjunctions:

A **revision** of the program **will result** in **increases** in our efficiency in the **servicing** of clients.

✓ If we **revise** the program, we **can serve** clients more efficiently.

3. The logic of your sentences is more explicit. When you nominalize verbs, you link actions with fuzzy prepositions and phrases such as *of*, *by*, and *on the part of*. But when you use verbs, you link clauses with precise subordinating conjunctions such as *because*, *although*, and *if*:

Our more effective **presentation** of our study **resulted** in our **success**, despite an earlier **start** by others.

✓ Although others **started** earlier, we **succeeded** because we **presented** our study more effectively.

4. Your sentences tell more coherent stories. Nominalizations let you distort the sequence of actions (numbers refer to the real sequence of events). Compare:

Decisions<sup>4</sup> in regard to administration<sup>5</sup> of medication despite inability<sup>2</sup> of irrational patients appearing<sup>1</sup> in a Trauma Center to provide legal consent<sup>3</sup> rest with the attending physician alone.

- ✓ When patients appear<sup>1</sup> in a Trauma Center and behave<sup>2</sup> so irrationally that they cannot legally consent<sup>3</sup> to treatment, only the attending physician can decide<sup>4</sup> whether to medicate<sup>5</sup> them.

## Exercise 2.4

One sentence in each of these pairs is clear, expressing characters as subjects and actions as verbs; the other is less clear, with actions in nominalizations and characters often not in subjects. First, decide which is which. Then underline subjects, bracket verbs, box actions, and circle characters. What do you notice about where these words appear in the sentences?

- 1a. Most people accept that atmospheric carbon dioxide elevates global temperatures.
- 1b. There has been speculation by educators about the role of the family in improving educational achievement.
- 2a. The store's price increases led to frustration among its customers.
- 2b. When we write concisely, readers understand easily.
- 3a. Although researchers understand the cause of the common cold, they have failed to develop a vaccine to immunize those most at risk.
- 3b. Attempts by economists at defining full employment have been met with failure.
- 4a. Complaints by editorial writers about voter apathy rarely offer suggestions about dispelling it.
- 4b. Although critics claim that children who watch a lot of television tend to become less able readers, no one has demonstrated that to be true.
- 5a. The loss of market share to online stores resulted in the closing of many suburban shopping malls.
- 5b. When educators embrace new-media technology, our schools will teach complex subjects more effectively.
- 6a. We need to discover which populations are most at risk of developing dementia so that we can intervene effectively.
- 6b. There is a need for an analysis of library use to provide a reliable base for the projection of needed resources.

## Exercise 2.5

Now revise the nominalized sentences in Exercise 2.4 into sentences in which the actions are verbs. Use as your model the clear sentence with which the nominalized sentence

is paired. For example, if the clear sentence begins with *when*, your revision should also begin with *when*:

- Sentence to revise: 2a. The **store's** price **INCREASES** **led** to **FRUSTRATION** among its **customers**.
- Model: 2b. When **we** **write** concisely, **readers** **understand** more easily.
- Your revision: 2a. When the **store** **increased** prices, ...

## Exercise 2.6

Revise these next sentences so that actions are expressed not as nominalizations but as verbs with characters as their subjects. In sentences 1 through 4, characters are in gold and nominalizations are capitalized.

1. The **developer's** HOPE was for a COMPLETION of the facility before the end of the year, but the **contractor's** FAILURE to remain on schedule made that an IMPOSSIBILITY.
2. ATTEMPTS were made on the part of the **president's aides** to assert **his** IMMUNITY from a **congressional** subpoena.
3. There were PREDICTIONS by **business executives** that the **economy** would experience a quick REVIVAL.
4. **Your** ANALYSIS of **my** report omits any data in SUPPORT of **your** CRITICISM of **my** FINDINGS.

In sentences 5 through 8, the characters are in gold; find the actions and revise.

5. Attempts at explaining increases in **voter** participation in this year's elections were made by several **candidates**.
6. The agreement by the **class** on the reading list was based on the assumption that there would be tests on only certain selections.
7. There was no independent **business-sector** study of the cause of the sudden increase in the trade surplus.
8. An understanding as to the need for controls over drinking on campus was recognized by **fraternities**.

## A Qualification: Useful Nominalizations

We have so relentlessly urged you to turn nominalizations into verbs that you might think you should never use them. But in fact, you can't write well without them. The trick is to know which to keep and which to revise. Keep these (verbs are boldfaced, nominations are capitalized):

### 1. A nominalization that is a short subject that refers to a previous sentence:

- ✓ These ARGUMENTS all depend on a single unproven claim.
- ✓ This DECISION can lead to positive outcomes.



Such nominalizations link one sentence to another in a cohesive flow, an issue we'll address in more detail in Lesson 4.

## 2. A short nominalization that replaces an awkward *The fact that*:

The fact that she **admitted** guilt impressed me.

- ✓ Her **ADMISSION** of guilt impressed me.

But then, why not this?

- ✓ She **impressed** me when she **admitted** her guilt.

## 3. A nominalization that names what would be the object of the verb:

I accepted what she **requested**.

- ✓ I accepted her **REQUEST**.

Familiar nominalizations such as *request* feel more concrete than abstract ones. But when you can, you should still express actions as verbs:

Her **REQUEST** for **ASSISTANCE** **came** after the deadline.

- ✓ She **requested** **ASSISTANCE** after the deadline.

## 4. A nominalization that refers to a concept so familiar to your readers that to them, it is a virtual character (more about this in the next lesson):

- ✓ The **DEBATE** **focused** on the value of public **EDUCATION**.
- ✓ All reputable scientists **accept** **EVOLUTION** as a fact.
- ✓ **TAXATION** without **REPRESENTATION** **did** not **spark** the American **REVOLUTION**.

You must develop an eye for distinguishing nominalizations like these, which all name familiar concepts, from those you can revise into verbs:

The candidate's **REFUSAL** **to contest** the results of the **ELECTION** was a **DISAPPOINTMENT** to her supporters.

- ✓ The candidate **refused to contest** the results of the **ELECTION**, **disappointing** her supporters.

A final observation before we end: your readers want you to write clearly, even simply—but not simplistically (see p. 16). Some argue that all sentences should be short, no more than fifteen words or so. But many mature ideas cannot be expressed so compactly. In Lessons 9 and 10 we look at ways to write longer sentences that communicate complex ideas but are still readable.

## Exercise 2.7 In Your Own Words

Go through a page of your own writing. Underline whole subjects and bracket verbs. Now, think about the story you are telling. Circle the main characters and box their actions, wherever they appear. Look especially for actions hidden in nominalizations. What do you notice? How clear will a reader likely find your writing? If necessary, revise to align characters with subjects and important actions with verbs.

## Exercise 2.8 In Your Own Words

Writers tend to think their writing is clearer than their readers do. Select a page of your writing and share it with a reader. Both of you rate its clarity on a scale of 1–10, with 10 being perfectly clear and 1 being incomprehensible. Use the procedures for analyzing sentences on pp. 32–33 to explain any differences in your ratings. Revise your writing if necessary.

### Summing Up

Readers want to see actions as verbs and characters as subjects (not just *in* subjects). So keep these two principles in mind as you write and revise:

#### 1. Express actions in verbs:

The **intention** of the committee is to improve morale.

- ✓ The committee **intends** to improve morale.

#### 2. Make the subjects of those verbs the characters associated with those actions:

A *decision* by the **dean** in regard to the funding of the program by the **college** is necessary for adequate **staff** preparation.

- ✓ The **staff** can prepare adequately only after the **dean** decides whether the **college** will fund the program.

Consider keeping nominalizations when:

##### a. they refer to a previous sentence:

- ✓ These ARGUMENTS all depend on a single unproven claim.

##### b. they replace an awkward *the fact that*:

The fact that she strenuously objected impressed me.

- ✓ Her strenuous OBJECTIONS impressed me.

##### c. they name what would be the object of a verb:

I do not know what she intends.

- ✓ I do not know her INTENTIONS.

##### d. they name a concept so familiar to your readers that it is a virtual character:

✓ Everyone passed the EXAMINATION.

- ✓ The PETITION to put the AMENDMENT on the ballot succeeded.

# Lesson 3

## Characters

*When character is lost, all is lost.*  
—ANONYMOUS

Readers think sentences are clear and direct when they see key actions in their verbs. Compare these sentences:

- 1a.** The researchers expected that the Institutional Review Board would recommend that they revise the study.
- 1b.** The researchers had an expectation that the Institutional Review Board would make a recommendation that they undertake a revision of the study.
- 1c.** The expectation of the researchers was that the recommendation of the Institutional Review Board would be for a revision of the study.

Most readers find **1b** less clear than **1a**. But they find **1c** much less clear than either of the other two. The reason is this: in both **1a** and **1b**, the important characters (gold) are simple subjects (italicized) of verbs (bold). Even though **1b** expresses important actions as abstractions (capitalized) rather than verbs, its subjects are still characters:

- 1a.** The *researchers* **expected** that the *Institutional Review Board* would **recommend** that *they* **revise** the study.
- 1b.** The *researchers* **had** an EXPECTATION that the *Institutional Review Board* would **make** a RECOMMENDATION that *they* **undertake** a REVISION of the study.

But in **1c** the simple subjects are not concrete characters but abstractions (italicized words are not gold but capitalized):

- 1c.** The EXPECTATION of the *researchers* **was** that the RECOMMENDATION of the *Institutional Review Board* would **be** for a REVISION of the study.

The different verbs in **1a** and **1b** matter somewhat, but those abstract simple subjects in **1c** matter more. Even worse, characters can be deleted entirely, like this:

- 1d.** There was an expectation that the recommendation would be for a revision of the study.

Who expects? Who recommends? Who revises? Context might help readers guess correctly, but if it is ambiguous, they could guess wrongly.

## Here's the Point

Readers want actions in verbs, but they want characters as subjects even more. We create a problem for readers when for no good reason we fail to name characters as subjects or, worse, delete them entirely. It is important to express actions in verbs, but the *first* principle of a clear style is this: make the subjects of most of your verbs the main characters in your story.

## How to Revise: Characters and Actions (Again)

To get characters into subjects, you have to know three things:

1. when your subjects are not characters
2. if they aren't, where you should look for characters
3. what you should do when you find them (or don't)

This sentence, for example, feels indirect and impersonal:

In most instances, governmental intervention in fast-changing industries leads to a predictable distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.

We can analyze and revise it according to our procedure from Lesson 2:

### 1. Skipping short introductory phrases, underline the first seven or eight words.

In most instances, governmental intervention in fast-changing industries leads to a predictable distortion of market evolution and interference in new product development.

In those first words, readers want to see characters not just *in* the whole subject, as *government* is implied in *governmental*, but *as* the simple subject. Here they aren't.

### 2. Find the main characters. They may be objects of prepositions (particularly *by* and *of*), possessive nouns or pronouns attached to nominalizations, or only implied. In that sentence, one possible character, *industries*, is a noun. Another, *government*, is in the adjective *governmental*. A third, *market*, modifies the object of a preposition: *of market evolution*.

### 3. Skim the sentence and others around it for actions involving those characters. Look for actions buried in adjectives (*predictable* → *predict*) and especially in nominalizations: *intervention*, *distortion*, *evolution*, *interference*, *development*.

**4. Pair characters with actions expressed as verbs.** To decide which actions go with which characters, ask *Who is doing what?* Be aware that just like actions, characters can also hide in adjectives (*governmental* → *government*):

governmental INTERVENTION	→	government <b>intervenes</b>
DISTORTION	→	[government] <b>distorts</b>
market EVOLUTION	→	markets <b>evolve</b>
INTERFERENCE	→	[government] <b>interferes</b>
DEVELOPMENT	→	[markets] <b>develop</b>

**5. Reassemble those subjects and verbs into a new sentence.** Use conjunctions such as *if*, *although*, *because*, *when*, *how*, and *why* to show how the ideas in the sentence fit together:

- ✓ In most instances, when government intervenes in fast-changing industries, it predictably distorts how markets evolve and interferes with the development of new products.

(Notice that you don't have to pair every potential character with an action or turn every potential action into a verb. In this case, we didn't use *industries* as a subject, and we retained the nominalization *development*.)

## Here's the Point

The first step in analyzing a dense style is to look at subjects. If you do not see main characters as simple subjects, you have to look for them. They can be in objects of prepositions, in possessive pronouns, or in adjectives. Once you find them, look for actions they are involved in. When you are revising, make those characters the subjects of verbs expressing those actions. When you are reading a dense passage, try to find characters and their actions, and retell the story to yourself.

## Reconstructing Absent Characters

Readers have the biggest problem with sentences devoid of *all* characters:

- | A decision was made in favor of doing an analysis of the disagreement.

That sentence could mean either of these, and more:

| We decided that I should analyze why they disagreed.

| I decided that you should analyze why she disagreed.

The writer may know who is doing what, and readers may be able to guess from context. But often they can't and will need help.

Sometimes we omit characters to make a general statement:

An understanding of the cause of bipolar disorder requires attention to multiple variables rather than an assumption that the disorder is dependent on a single biological or environmental factor.

But when we try to revise that into something clearer, we have to invent characters (gold) and then decide what to call them. Do we use *one*, *we* or *you*? Do we name a generic “doer”?

- ✓ If **one/we/you/researchers** are to understand what causes bipolar disorder, **one/we/you/they** should attend to multiple variables rather than assuming that it depends on a single biological or environmental factor.

To most of us, *one* feels stiff, but *we* may be ambiguous because it can refer just to the writer, to the writer and others but not the reader, to the writer and reader but not others, or to everyone. And if you are not directly addressing your reader (as we do), *you* is usually too casual.

But if you avoid both nominalizations and vague pronouns, you can slide into passive verbs (we’ll discuss them in a moment):

To understand what causes bipolar disorder, multiple variables should **be attended to**, rather than it **being assumed** that the disorder depends on a single biological or environmental factor.

To reconstruct missing characters, you have to use your judgment. In general, choose the most specific characters you can find.

## Quick Tip

When you are explaining a complicated issue to someone involved in it, imagine sitting across the table from that person, saying *you* as often as you can:

Taxable intangible property includes financial notes and municipal bonds. A one-time tax of 2% on its value applies to this property.

- ✓ **You** have to pay tax on **your** intangible property, including **your** financial notes and municipal bonds. On this property, **you** pay a one-time tax of 2%.

If *you* doesn’t seem appropriate, change it to a character that is:

- ✓ **Taxpayers** have to pay tax on **their** intangible property, including **their** financial notes and municipal bonds. **They** pay...

## Abstractions as Characters

So far, we have treated characters as if they must be flesh-and-blood people. But inanimate things and even abstractions can serve as characters, so long as you make them the subjects of a series of sentences that tell a story. For instance, we

might have solved the problem of the previous example by choosing *studies* as our character (gold):

- ✓ To understand what causes bipolar disorder, **studies** should attend to multiple factors rather than assuming that it depends on a single biological or environmental factor.

Now the sentence is clear but also appropriately professional.

You can also tell stories whose main characters are abstractions, even nominalizations. All things being equal, you should prefer concrete characters. But there are circumstances when a more abstract version of a story is better. These four sentences all convey the same message, but they do it at different levels of abstraction:

- 2a.** You can grow sustainably by gradually expanding retail outlets in underserved areas.
- 2b.** The company can grow sustainably by gradually expanding retail outlets in underserved areas.
- 2c.** Sustainable growth can be achieved through a gradual expansion of retail outlets in underserved areas.
- 2d.** Achievement of sustainable growth is possible through retail outlet expansion in underserved areas.

Sentence **2a** is the most concrete because it has a flesh-and-blood character as its subject: *you*. You might use this sentence if you were addressing a company executive directly. The next sentence **2b** is just a bit more abstract because its subject is not a person, but *company* is still a concrete character. In both **2a** and **2b**, the character in the subject is paired with a verb that names its action: *grow*. With **2c**, however, the focus shifts from a concrete character to an abstract concept: *growth*. And because we have turned that important action into an abstract noun, we need to use another verb in the sentence. But even though this sentence is abstract, it might be right for its context. For example, perhaps you want that executive to focus on the goal of *growth* in itself. On the other hand, the simple subject of **2d**, *achievement*, is excessively abstract and should be revised. The point is this: as a default, choose the most concrete characters you can, but more than that, tell the right story.

The way to make an abstraction into a character is to make it the subject of a series of sentences and clauses. (We'll talk more about this issue in Lesson 4 when we discuss *topics*.) Here's a story about *freedom of speech* (gold), a familiar abstraction made up of two nominalizations (whole subjects are underlined):

- No human right is more basic than **freedom of speech**, **which** ensures individual expression and guarantees the open flow of ideas in society. **It** arose as a pillar of modern political thought during the late eighteenth century, and in 1948, **it** was recognized by the United Nations as a universal right. **It** protects not only

unpopular political views but also other forms of controversial expression, including artistic expression. Nevertheless, **freedom of speech** is not absolute: **it** is bounded by other rights and principles, including ...

Like *studies* in the last example, *freedom of speech* becomes a character because it (or an associated pronoun like *which* or *it*) appears as the subject of verbs that state specific actions: *ensures*, *guarantees*, *arose*, and so on. In this case, two passive verbs, *was recognized* and *is bounded*, keep the phrase in the subject position.

But when you use abstractions as characters, you can create a problem. A story about an abstraction as familiar as *freedom of speech* is clear enough, but if you surround an unfamiliar abstract character with a lot of other abstractions, readers may feel that your writing is unnecessarily dense.

For example, few of us are familiar with the terms *prospective intention* and *immediate intention*, so most of us are likely to struggle with a story about them, especially when they are surrounded by other abstractions (capitalized):

The ARGUMENT is this. The cognitive component of INTENTION exhibits a high degree of COMPLEXITY. INTENTION is temporally divisible into two: prospective INTENTION and immediate INTENTION. The cognitive function of prospective INTENTION is the REPRESENTATION of a subject's similar past ACTIONS, his current situation, and his course of future ACTIONS. That is, the cognitive component of prospective INTENTION is a PLAN. The cognitive function of immediate INTENTION is the MONITORING and GUIDANCE of ongoing bodily MOVEMENT.

—Myles Brand, *Intending and Acting: Toward a Naturalized Action Theory*

The abstract concepts on which we are supposed to focus—the two types of *intention*—get lost in a sea of other abstractions. We can make the passage clearer if we turn most of those abstractions into verbs and tell its story from the point of view of flesh-and-blood characters: the author, in the singular pronoun *I*, and human beings, in the plural pronouns *we*, *us*, and *our* (simple subjects are italicized, verbs are boldfaced):

✓ *I argue* this about INTENTION. *It has* a highly complex cognitive component of two temporal kinds: prospective and immediate. *We use* prospective INTENTION to **represent** how *we have acted* in our past and present and how *we will act* in the future. That is, *we use* the cognitive component of prospective INTENTION to **help us plan**. *We use* immediate INTENTION to **monitor** and **guide** our bodies as *we move* them.

But does the passage now say something the author didn't mean? Some argue that any change in form changes meaning. In this case, the author might offer an opinion, but only his readers could decide whether the two passages have different meanings, because at the end of the day, a passage means only what careful and competent readers think it does.



---

## Here's the Point

Most readers want the subjects of verbs to name flesh-and-blood characters. But often, you must write about abstractions. When you do, turn them into virtual characters by making them the subjects of verbs that tell a story. If readers are familiar with your abstractions, no problem. But when they are not, avoid using lots of other abstract nominalizations around them. When you revise an abstract passage, you may have a problem if the hidden characters are “people in general.” Unfortunately, unlike many other languages, English offers no good way to name a generic “doer.” Try a general term for whoever is doing the action, such as *researchers*, *social critics*, *one*, and so on. If that won't work, try *we*.

---

---

## Exercise 3.1

Analyze and revise these sentences so that each has a specific character as the subject of a specific verb. To revise, you may have to invent characters. Use *we*, *I*, or any other word that seems appropriate. For the first four sentences, possible characters are suggested in brackets.

1. Contradictions in the data require an explanation. [we]
  2. Having their research taken seriously by professionals in the field was hard work for the students. [students]
  3. In recent years, a new recognition of the contributions of African American women to the Civil Rights movement has led to a reassessment of its impact and character. [historians]
  4. Resistance has been growing to building mental health facilities in residential areas because of a belief that the few examples of improper management are typical. [residents]
  5. A decision about forcibly administering medication in an emergency room setting despite the inability of an irrational patient to provide legal consent is usually an on-scene medical decision.
  6. The performance of the play was marked by enthusiasm, but there was a lack of intelligent staging.
  7. Despite the critical panning of the show's latest season, the love of its loyal fans was not affected.
  8. The rejection of the proposal was a disappointment but not a surprise because our expectation was that a political decision had been made.
-

## Characters and Passive Verbs

More than any other advice, you probably remember *Write in the active voice, not the passive*. That’s not bad advice, but it has exceptions.

When you write in the active voice, you typically put

- the character, agent, or source of an action in the subject
- the goal or receiver of an action in a direct object:

	subject	verb	object
Active:	I	lost	the money.
	character/agent/source	action	goal

A verb is in the passive voice when its past participle is preceded by a form of *be* (as it is in this next example). The passive differs from the active in two ways:

- The subject names the goal or receiver of the action.
- The character, agent, or source of the action comes after the verb in a *by*-phrase or is dropped entirely:

	subject	be + verb	prepositional phrase
Passive:	The money	was lost	[by me].
	goal	action	character/agent/source

The terms *active* and *passive* are ambiguous, however, because they can refer not only to those two *grammatical constructions* but also to how a sentence *makes you feel*. Compare these two sentences:

We can manage the problem if we control costs.

Problem management requires cost control.

Grammatically, both sentences are in the active voice, but the second *feels* flat or passive for three reasons:

- Neither of its actions—*management* and *control*—are verbs; both are nominalizations.
- The subject is *problem management*, an abstraction.
- The sentence lacks flesh-and-blood characters.

To understand why we respond to those two sentences as we do, we have to keep these meanings distinct. In what follows, we discuss grammatical passives.

## Choosing Between Active and Passive

Some critics of style tell us to avoid the passive everywhere because it adds words and often deletes the character or agent, the “doer” of the action. But the passive is sometimes the better choice. To choose between active and passive, you have to answer three questions:

1. **Must your readers know who is responsible for the action?** Often, we don’t say who does an action because we don’t know or readers won’t care. We naturally choose the passive in these sentences:

- ✓ The president **was rumored** to have considered resigning.
- ✓ Those who **are found** guilty can **be fined**.
- ✓ Valuable records should always **be kept** in a safe.

If we do not know who spreads rumors, we cannot say. And no one doubts who finds people guilty or fines them or who should keep records safe, so we don’t have to say. So those passives are the right choice.

Sometimes, of course, writers use the passive when they don’t want readers to know who is responsible for an action:

- ✓ Because corners **were cut**, mistakes **were made**.

Lesson 11 discusses this issue of intended impersonality.

2. **Would the active or passive verb help your readers move more smoothly from one sentence to the next?** We depend on the beginning of a sentence to give us a context of what we know before we read what’s new. A sentence confuses us when it opens with information that is new and unexpected. In this next passage, the subject of the second sentence gives us new and complex information (underlined) before we read more familiar information that we recall from the previous sentence (*italicized*):

We must decide whether to improve education in the sciences alone or to raise the level of education across the whole curriculum. The weight given to industrial competitiveness as opposed to the value we attach to the liberal arts <sup>new information</sup> **will determine** <sup>active verb</sup> *our decision*. <sup>familiar information</sup>

In the second sentence, the verb *determine* is in the active voice. But we could read the sentence more easily if it were passive, because the passive would put the short, familiar information (*our decision*) first and the newer, more complex information last, the order we prefer:

- ✓ We must decide whether to improve education in the sciences alone or raise the level of education across the whole curriculum. *Our decision* <sup>familiar information</sup> **will be determined** <sup>passive verb</sup> by the weight we give to industrial competitiveness as opposed to the value we attach to the liberal arts. <sup>new information</sup>

Lesson 4 explains more fully where to put familiar and new information.

**3. Would the active or passive give readers a more consistent and appropriate point of view?** The writer of this next passage reports the end of World War II in Europe from the point of view of the Allies. To do so, she uses active verbs (in green) to make the Allies a consistent sequence of subjects:

- ✓ By early 1945, the Allies **had** essentially **defeated** Germany; all that remained **was** a bloody climax. American, French, British, and Russian forces **had** **breached** its borders and **were** **bombing** it around the clock. But they **had** not yet so **devastated** Germany as to destroy its ability to resist.

Had she wanted to explain history from the German point of view, she would have used passive verbs (in green) to make Germany the subject/character:

- ✓ By early 1945, Germany **had** essentially **been defeated**; all that remained **was** a bloody climax. Its borders **had** **been breached**, and it **was** **being bombed** around the clock. It **had** not **been** so **devastated**, however, that it could not **resist**.

## Here's the Point

Many writers use the passive too often, but you will struggle to write clearly if you avoid it entirely. Use it in these contexts:

- You don't know who did an action, readers don't care, or you don't want them to know.
- You want to shift a long, unfamiliar, or complex bundle of information to the end of a sentence, especially when doing so lets you begin with a bundle that is shorter, more familiar, or simpler.
- You want to focus your readers' attention on a particular character.

## Exercise 3.2

Revise these sentences to make all active verbs passive and all passive verbs active. Which sentences improve? Which do not? (In the first two, active verbs are italicized, and passive verbs are boldfaced.)

1. Independence **is gained** by young people when skills **are learned** that the market-place *values*.
2. The different planes of the painting **are noticed** because the artist *sets* their colors against a background of shades of gray that she *lays on* in layers that cannot **be seen** unless the surface **is examined** closely.
3. In this article, it is argued that even if the Glass-Steagall Act had not been repealed a decade earlier, the 2008 financial crisis would still have occurred.
4. Science education will not be improved to a level sufficient to ensure that today's information and technology industries are supplied with enough skilled workers and researchers until more funding is provided to primary and secondary schools.

5. Mice are chosen most often when transgenic cancer models are constructed by researchers, but zebrafish are also used.
6. Music critics can divide contemporary jazz into a number of subgenres, among which common features such as complex rhythms, tonal inflections, and improvisation are shared.
7. Although it has been shown that the environmental impact study was flawed, its findings were relied on by the city council when the zoning decision was made.
8. Benoit Mandelbrot coined the term *fractal* to describe geometrical shapes in which the shape of the whole is recapitulated at ever smaller scales by the parts.

## The “Objective” Passive vs. *I/We*

Some scholarly writers use the passive voice to avoid first-person subjects (*I* and *we*) and create an objective point of view:

Based on the writers’ verbal intelligence, prior knowledge, and essay scores, their essays **were analyzed** for structure and **evaluated** for richness of concepts. The subjects **were** then **separated** into high- or low-ability groups. Half of each group **was** randomly **assigned** to a treatment group or to a placebo group.

The writer could have written this:

Based on the writers’ verbal intelligence, prior knowledge, and essay scores, *I* **analyzed** their essays for structure and **evaluated** them for richness of concepts. *I* then **separated** the subjects into high- and low-ability groups. *I* randomly **assigned** half of each group to a treatment group or to a placebo group.

Is that less objective? Opinions differ, but we don’t think so. Nevertheless, the practice of using the passive voice to eliminate first-person subjects is common, especially in the natural and social sciences.

We would note, however, that this impersonal, “scientific” style is a modern development. In his “New Theory of Light and Colors” (1672), Sir Isaac Newton wrote this charming first-person account of an experiment:

I procured a triangular glass prism, to try therewith the *celebrated phenomena* of colours. And in order thereto, having darkened my chamber, and made a small hole in my window-shuts, to let in a convenient quantity of the sun’s light, I placed my prism at its entrance, that it might be thereby refracted to the opposite wall. It was at first a very pleasing divertisement to view the vivid and intense colours produced thereby...

Were Newton writing for a scientific journal today, he might have started, “A triangular glass prism was procured ...”

But even today, scholars, including scientists, don’t use this dense, impersonal style all the time. In fact, they use the active voice and *I* and *we* regularly. These next passages come from articles in respected journals:

- ✓ This paper is concerned with two problems. Briefly: how can *we* best handle in a transformational grammar, (i) Restrictions on..., To illustrate, *we* may cite..., *we* shall show...

—P.H. Matthews, "Problems of Selection in Transformational Grammar," *Journal of Linguistics*

- ✓ The survey assessed approximately fifty political-cultural variables, too many to examine in a single paper. As a first step, *we* have selected for discussion certain items which involve the cultural requisites for democracy...

—Andrew J. Nathan and Tianjian Shi, "Cultural Requisites for Democracy in China: Findings from a Survey," *Daedalus*

Here are the first few words of several consecutive sentences from an article in *Science*, a journal of great prestige:

- ✓ *We* examine..., *We* compare..., *We* have used..., Each has been weighted..., *We* merely take..., They are subject..., *We* use..., Efron and Morris describe..., *We* observed..., *We* might find..

—John P. Gilbert, Bucknam McPeck, and Frederick Mosteller, "Statistics and Ethics in Surgery and Anesthesia," *Science*

It is not true that academic writers always avoid the first person. But they do tend to use it in certain places and in certain ways. Most commonly, the first person appears in what is called *metadiscourse*.

## Metadiscourse

Look again at the passages above. The first, with its passive verbs, describes research procedures that anyone could do. The last three use active verbs and the first person to describe the writers' own writing and thinking. These passages contain examples of *metadiscourse*, or language that refers not to a writer's subject matter but to the writer, the reader, or the writing itself (the Greek prefix *meta-* means "after" or, in this context, "about").

Metadiscourse can appear anywhere, but it is most common in introductions and conclusions, where writers explain what they are going to do or what they have done. While you should not use metadiscourse excessively (see Lesson 8), most writing contains some, and it can help your readers follow and understand you better. Here are some ways you can use metadiscourse:

- To explain your thinking or writing: *In this paper, we will argue/claim/show...; I conclude from these data that ...*
- To trace logic or form of your argument: *First...; In addition...; Most important...; Consequently ...*
- To address your readers: *As you recall...; Consider ...*
- To describe the organization of your document: *This paper is divided into three parts...; Our argument proceeds as follows ...*

- To refer to other parts of your document: *In the passage above...*; *As demonstrated by Figure 1...*
- To express a stance or point of view: *Not unexpectedly...*; *We concur that...*; *It seems unlikely that...*
- To hedge or intensify your argument: *usually, perhaps, seems, in some respects...*; *very, clearly, certainly...* (I discuss hedges and intensifiers more in Lesson 8.)

## Here's the Point

Some writers and editors avoid the first person by using the passive everywhere, but deleting an *I* or *we* doesn't make a researcher's thinking more objective. We know that behind those impersonal sentences are still flesh-and-blood people doing, thinking, and writing. In fact, the first-person *I* and *we* are common in scholarly prose when used with verbs that name actions unique to the writer.

## Exercise 3.3

The verbs in 1 through 4 below are passive, but some could be active because they are metadiscourse verbs that would take first-person subjects. Revise the passive verbs that should be changed into active verbs. Then go through each sentence again and revise nominalizations into verbs as needed.

1. It is believed that a lack of understanding of the effects of sleep deprivation on cognitive performance is a contribution to the practice of cramming for tests.
2. The model has been subjected to extensive statistical analysis.
3. Success in promoting international tourism is suggested here as the main cause of improvement of the Mexican economy.
4. The creation of a database is being considered, but no estimate has been made in regard to the potential of its usefulness.

The verbs in 5 through 8 are active, but some of them could be passive because they are not metadiscourse verbs and their subjects are distracting or not important to the sentence's meaning. Revise the active verbs that should be changed into passive verbs, and revise in other ways as needed.

5. According to the news report, a prosecutor indicted the mayor for violating campaign finance laws.
6. According to church records, the church originally installed the organ in the 1870s and then renovated it in the 1950s.
7. To make an evaluation of changes in the flow rate, I made a comparison of the current rate with the original rate on the basis of figures I had compiled with figures that Jordan had collected.
8. We performed the tissue rejection study on the basis of methods developed with our discovery of increases in dermal sloughing as a result of cellular regeneration.

## Noun + Noun + Noun

One more stylistic choice does not directly involve characters and actions, but we discuss it here because it can distort the match that readers expect between the form of an idea and the grammar of its expression. It is the long compound noun phrase:

*Early childhood thought disorder misdiagnosis* often results from unfamiliarity with recent *research literature* describing such conditions. This paper is a review of seven recent studies in which are findings of particular relevance to *pre-adolescent hyperactivity diagnosis* and to *treatment modalities* involving *medication maintenance level evaluation procedures*.

It is fine to modify one noun with another, as common compounds such as *stone wall*, *student center*, *space shuttle*, and many others show. And a compound noun phrase can allow you to express a complex idea more concisely than a full clause.

But long strings of nouns feel heavy, so it is usually best to avoid them. Revise compound noun phrases of your own invention, especially when they include nominalizations. Turn one of the nouns (usually the last) into a verb, reverse the order of the words, and find prepositions to connect them:

1	2	3	4	5
early	childhood	thought	disorder	misdiagnosis
misdiagnose	disordered	thought	in early	childhood
5	4	3	1	2

Reassembled, that phrase looks like this:

Physicians *misdiagnose*<sup>5</sup> *disordered*<sup>4</sup> *thought*<sup>3</sup> *in young*<sup>1</sup> *children*<sup>2</sup> because they are unfamiliar with recent literature on the subject.

If, however, a long compound noun phrase includes a technical term in your field, keep that part of the compound and unpack the rest:

Physicians *misdiagnose*<sup>5</sup> ***thought disorders***<sup>3,4</sup> *in young*<sup>1</sup> *children*<sup>2</sup> because they are unfamiliar with recent literature on the subject.

## Exercise 3.4

Identify and revise the strings of nouns in these sentences:

1. Diabetic patient blood pressure reduction may be brought about by renal depressor application.
2. The goal of this article is to describe text comprehension processes and recall protocol production.
3. On the basis of these principles, we may now attempt to formulate narrative information extraction rules.



4. This paper is an investigation into information processing behavior involved in computer human cognition simulation.
5. The EPA has published new guidelines for automobile CO emissions testing procedures.
6. A life annuity can offer lifetime minimum retirement income assurance.

## Exercise 3.5

Because compound noun phrases can compress a thought into a few words, they are common in headlines. Such headlines are often unintentionally funny, because their compounds can be unpacked in different ways. For example:

Nuns Forgive Break-In, Assault Suspect

Did the nuns forgive the fellow who broke into their convent and assaulted them, or did they assault him after forgiving him? In other words, should we take *assault* as a noun or a verb? We can only tell from context. Scan the web to find other such examples of ambiguous “headlines.”

## Short Subjects

We made this point in passing in Lesson 2 and earlier in this lesson when discussing passive verbs, but it is worth stating directly: readers prefer sentences that have a short, simple phrase as the whole subject rather than a long, complicated one.

This principle follows from and complements our other two: if you make characters the simple subjects of your sentences, and you express important actions as verbs rather than nominalizations, your whole subjects will also be short. Compare these:

**3a.** The *centralization* of functions by many *retailers* over the past several years has led to customer *objections* to more complicated purchasing procedures.

**3b.** Many *retailers* have *centralized* functions over the past several years, leading *customers* to object to more complicated purchasing procedures.

Most readers prefer **3b** to **3a**. One reason is that in **3b** the simple subject is a character, *retailers*, but another is that the whole subject is short, only two words. In **3a**, the main character *retailers* is present in the whole subject, buried in a prepositional phrase, but the simple subject is the nominalization *centralization*. The whole subject is also a sprawling twelve words long. That’s a problem, because readers get impatient when a subject goes on for more than a handful of words. They like to get quickly to the verb and into the back of the sentence. Notice also that in **3a**, ten words come between the simple subject and the verb; in **3b**, the

verb comes right after the subject. It's fine to have a word or two (usually an adverb) between the subject and verb, but more than a few will make your sentence feel heavy and slow. So keep subjects short and get quickly to your verb. (We'll take up this principle in more detail in Lesson 9.)

## Clarity and the Professional Voice

Every group expects its members to show that they accept its values by adopting its distinctive voice. The apprentice banker must learn not only to think and look like a banker but also to speak and write like one. Too often, though, aspiring professionals try to join the club by writing in its most complex technical language. When they do, they adopt an exclusionary style that erodes the trust on which civil society depends, especially in a world where information and expertise are means to power and control.

It is true that some research can never be made clear to intelligent lay readers—but less often than many researchers think. Here is an excerpt from Talcott Parsons, a social scientist who was as revered for his influence on his field as he was ridiculed for the opacity of his prose.

Apart from theoretical conceptualization there would appear to be no method of selecting among the indefinite number of varying kinds of factual observation which can be made about a concrete phenomenon or field so that the various descriptive statements about it articulate into a coherent whole, which constitutes an "adequate," a "determinate" description. Adequacy in description is secured insofar as determinate and verifiable answers can be given to all the scientifically important questions involved. What questions are important is largely determined by the logical structure of the generalized conceptual scheme which, implicitly or explicitly, is employed.

We can make that clearer to moderately well-educated readers:

Without a theory, scientists have no way to select from everything they could say about a subject only that which they can fit into a coherent whole that would be an "adequate" or "determinate" description. Scientists describe something "adequately" only when they can verify answers to all the questions they think are important. They decide what questions are important based on their implicit or explicit theories.

And we could make it even more concise:

Whatever you describe, you need a theory to fit its parts into a whole. You need a theory not only to verify answers but even to decide what questions to ask.

These versions lose the nuances of Parsons's passage, and the last one loses some of its content. But his excruciatingly dense style numbs all but his most masochistically dedicated readers. Most readers would accept the tradeoff.

Einstein said that everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler. Accordingly, your writing should be as complex as necessary, *but no more*.

## Exercise 3.6 In Your Own Words

Go through a page of your own writing. Circle all of the nominalizations and label all of the verbs as active or passive. For each nominalization and for each passive verb, state the specific reason you used it. If you cannot give a reason, revise it.

## Exercise 3.7 In Your Own Words

Select a passage from a major work in your field. Work with a partner to analyze its professional voice. What sorts of characters does it use? What is the balance between active and passive verbs? How are nominalizations used? How, and how extensively, does it use metadiscourse? Try to distinguish traits specific to this work from those that characterize the *field's* professional voice. Now, revise a passage of your own writing so that it imitates that voice. What did you have to change?

## Summing Up

1. Readers judge prose to be clear when subjects of sentences name characters and verbs name actions.
2. If you tell a story in which you make abstract nominalizations the main characters and subjects, use as few other nominalizations as you can:

A **NOMINALIZATION** is a REPLACEMENT of a verb by a noun, often resulting in DISPLACEMENT of characters from subjects by nouns.

- ✓ When a **NOMINALIZATION** replaces a verb with a noun, **it** often displaces characters from subjects.

3. Use a passive verb if the agent of an action is self-evident and so can go unstated:

The **voters** reelected the **president** with 54% of the vote.

- ✓ The **president** was reelected with 54% of the vote.

4. Use a passive verb if it lets you replace a long subject with a short one:

Research demonstrating the soundness of our reasoning and the need for action supported this decision.

- ✓ This decision was supported by research demonstrating the soundness of our reasoning and the need for action.

5. Use a passive verb if it gives your readers a coherent sequence of subjects:

- ✓ By early 1945, the Axis nations **had been** essentially **defeated**; all that remained was a bloody climax. The German borders **had been breached**, and both Germany and Japan **were being bombed** around the clock.

6. Use an active verb if it is a metadiscourse verb:

The terms of the analysis must **be defined**.

- ✓ We must **define** the terms of the analysis.

7. When possible, rewrite long compound noun phrases:

We discussed the **board**<sup>1</sup> **candidate**<sup>2</sup> **review**<sup>3</sup> **meeting**<sup>4</sup> **schedule**<sup>5</sup>.

- ✓ We discussed the **schedule**<sup>5</sup> of **meetings**<sup>4</sup> to **review**<sup>3</sup> **candidates**<sup>2</sup> for the **board**<sup>1</sup>.

## Lesson 4

# Cohesion and Coherence

*It is a common Fault in Writers, to allow their Readers too much knowledge: They begin with that which should be the Middle, and skipping backwards and forwards, 'tis impossible for any one but he who is perfect in the Subject before, to understand their Work, and such an one has no Occasion to read it.*

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

So far, we have focused mainly on individual sentences, and we have treated clarity as if it could be achieved just by mapping characters and actions onto subjects and verbs. But readers need more than individually clear sentences before they feel a passage hangs together. These two passages, for example, say much the same thing but feel very different:

- 1a. The safeguard of democracy everywhere—an educated citizenry—is being threatened by college costs that have been rising fast for the last several years. Family incomes are increasing more slowly than tuition, and only children of the wealthiest families will be able to afford a college education if this trend continues. Knowledge and intellectual skills as well as wealth will stratify us at that point, and the presumptions of political access, economic opportunity, and social mobility that ensure the stability of healthy democratic societies will erode.
- ✓ 1b. In the last several years, college costs have been rising so fast that they are now threatening the safeguard of democracy everywhere: an educated citizenry. Tuition is increasing faster than family incomes, and if this trend continues, a college education will soon be affordable only for the children of the wealthiest families. At that point, we will be stratified not only by wealth but also by knowledge and intellectual skills, and this stratification will erode the presumptions of political access, economic opportunity, and social mobility that ensure the stability of healthy democratic societies.

The first seems choppy, even disorganized; the second seems more connected.

But like the word *clear*, the words *choppy*, *disorganized*, and *connected* refer not to the words on the page but to how they make us *feel*. What is it about the *arrangement* of words in 1a that makes us feel we are moving through it in fits and starts? Why does 1b seem to flow more easily? We base those judgments on two aspects of word order:

- We judge a sequence of sentences to be *cohesive* based on how each sentence ends and the next begins.
- We judge a whole passage to be *coherent* based on how all the sentences in it cumulatively begin.

This lesson discusses the cohesion and coherence of passages. Lessons 6 and 7 discuss the coherence of whole documents and their sections.

## Cohesion

Sentences are cohesive when they seem to flow naturally one to the next, and this feeling depends on the way you manage the information that appears in your sentences' beginnings and endings. In fact, readers want sequences of sentences to be cohesive even more than they want individual sentences to be clear. To create that feeling of cohesion or flow in your writing, you have to think about your sentences not just individually but together. Here's how to do that.

### The Sense of Flow

Lesson 3 devoted a few pages to that familiar advice, *Avoid passives*. If we always did, we would choose sentence **2a**, which has an active verb, over sentence **2b**, which has a passive one:

**2a.** The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble **creates**<sub>active</sub> a black hole.

**2b.** A black hole **is created**<sub>passive</sub> by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.

But we might choose otherwise in context. Consider:

<sup>1</sup>Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. <sup>2a</sup>**The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole.** <sup>3</sup>So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

<sup>1</sup>Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. <sup>2b</sup>**A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.** <sup>3</sup>So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

In this context, our sense of flow calls not for **2a** but for **2b**. The reason is clear: the last four words of sentence **1** introduce an important character—*black holes in space*.

But with **2a**, the sentence with the active verb, the next concepts we hit are *collapsed stars* and *marbles*, information that seems to come out of nowhere:

<sup>1</sup>Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. <sup>2a</sup>The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates ...

If, however, we follow sentence **1** with **2b**, the one with the passive verb, we feel those sentences connect more smoothly. That's because the first words in **2b** repeat what we just read at the end of **1**:

<sup>1</sup>... by scientists studying black holes in space. <sup>2b</sup>A black hole is created by ...

Note too that the passive lets us *end* sentence **2b** with words that connect it to the *beginning* of sentence **3**:

<sup>1</sup>... black holes in space. <sup>2b</sup>A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into **a point perhaps no larger than a marble**. <sup>3</sup>**So much matter compressed into so little volume** changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

## Here's the Point

Sentences are *cohesive* when the last few words of one sentence set up information that appears in the first few words of the next. That's what gives us our experience of flow. In fact, that's an important function of the passive voice: to let us arrange sentences so that they flow easily from one to the next.

## Managing Information: Old Before New

We learn by connecting new information to what we already know. In sentences, readers therefore prefer to encounter information that is old or *familiar to them* before they encounter information that is new or unfamiliar. So:

- 1. Begin sentences with information familiar to your readers.** Readers get that familiar information in two ways. First, they remember words from the sentences they just read. That's why in our example about black holes, the beginning of **2b** coheres with the end of **1** and why the beginning of **3** coheres with the end of **2b**. Second, readers bring to a sentence a general knowledge of its subject. We would not be surprised, for example, to find the next sentence **4** begin like this:

... changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways. <sup>4</sup>**Astronomers have reported** that ...

The word *astronomers* did not appear in the preceding sentences, but since we are reading about space, we wouldn't stumble if we were to find it beginning a sentence in the passage.

2. **End sentences with information that readers cannot anticipate.** Your sentences have to tell your readers something new, but readers always prefer to receive this new information after they have read something familiar.
3. **Begin sentences with information that readers will find simple; end with information they will find complex.** This guideline follows from the others. What's familiar to your readers will seem simple to them; what's unfamiliar will seem complex.

You can more easily see when others fail to observe this old-before-new principle than when you do, because after you've worked on your own ideas for a while, they all seem familiar—to *you*. But hard as it is to distinguish old from new in your own writing, you have to try, because again, readers expect sentences to begin with something they find familiar and to end with something new. Thwart this expectation too often and your readers won't understand you (or at least think they don't).

In every series of sentences you write, you have to balance principles that make individual sentences clear and principles that make the whole passage cohesive. *But in that tradeoff, give priority to helping readers create a sense of cohesive flow.* Fortunately, the principle of old before new cooperates with the principle of characters as subjects: once you mention your main characters, readers recognize them as familiar. Thus, when characters are up front, so is familiar information.

---

## Here's the Point

So far, we have identified four principles of clarity. Two are about individual sentences:

- Make important actions verbs.
- Make main characters the subjects of sentences.

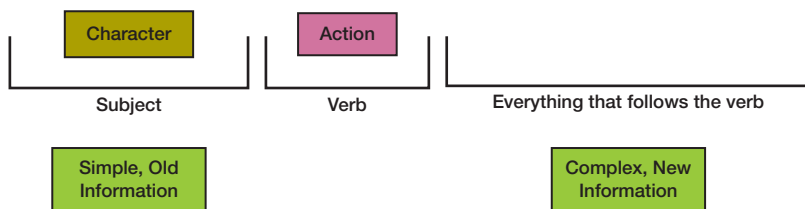
Two explain how sentences flow together:

- Begin sentences with old or familiar information; put new or unfamiliar information later.
- Begin sentences with simple information; put complex information later.

These principles usually complement one another, but if you have to choose among them, favor these last two. The way you organize information in your sentences determines how cohesive readers will find your writing. And for readers, a passage's overall *cohesion* is more important than the *clarity* of individual sentences.

We can integrate this old-before-new principle with our others. The general idea when crafting any sentence is to carry a reader from simplicity and familiarity to complexity and novelty.





## Quick Tip

Writers often refer to something in a previous sentence with words such as *this*, *these*, *that*, *those*, *another*, *such*, *second*, or *more*. When you use any of those signals, try to put them at or close to the beginning of a sentence:

How to calculate credits for classes taken in a community college is **another** issue that we must consider.

- ✓ **Another** issue that we must consider is how to calculate credits for classes taken in a community college.

## Exercise 4.1

Revise these passages to improve their flow by putting familiar information first in each sentence. In **1**, we have boldfaced the words that we feel express familiar information.

- Two aims—the recovery of the city’s economy and the modernization of its public-transportation system—were in the mayor’s mind **when she assumed office**. The city’s decline in unemployment and the increase in sales tax revenue testifies to **her success in the first**. But continuing traffic problems and bus and subway service delays indicate **less success with the second**. Nevertheless, the mere promise of future improvements pleased **the city’s voters**.
- The components of Abco’s profitability, particularly growth in emerging markets, will be highlighted in our report to demonstrate its advantages versus competitors. Revenue returns along several dimensions—product type, end-use, distribution channels, etc.—will provide a basis for this analysis. Likely growth prospects of Abco’s newest product lines will depend most on the development of new distribution channels in Africa and the Middle East, according to our projections. A range of innovative strategies will be needed to support the introduction of new products.
- Both of the film’s main characters suffer life-changing losses even though it is billed as a comedy. The only draft of a novel the female lead has been writing for five years is destroyed when her laptop crashes, but a more positive outlook on life ultimately results from this experience. In contrast, when a million-dollar lottery ticket is misplaced by her romantic interest, he sinks into depression and cynicism. The film’s comic effect is created by the different ways these characters respond to their similar situations.

## Coherence

Your readers want your writing to have cohesive flow because it helps them follow your train of thought. But they also want to feel that your writing is *coherent* or hangs together as a whole. *Coherence* is different from *cohesion*, but it is easy to confuse these words because they sound alike.

- *Cohesion* is when pairs of sentences fit together the way two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle do (recall the black hole example).
- *Coherence* is when all the sentences in a piece of writing add up to a larger whole, the way all the pieces in a puzzle add up to the picture on the box.

In a coherent passage, the sentences will cohere (or connect one to the next), but they will also share something more: a unifying focus that we will call the passage's *topic*.

### A Sense of the Whole

This next passage has good cohesive flow because we move from one sentence to the next without a hitch:

Sayner, Wisconsin, is the snowmobile capital of the world. The buzzing of snowmobile engines fills the air, and their tank-like tracks crisscross the snow. The snow reminds me of Mom's mashed potatoes, covered with furrows I would draw with my fork. Her mashed potatoes usually make me sick—that's why I play with them. I like to make a hole in the middle of the potatoes and fill it with melted butter. This behavior has been the subject of long chats between my analyst and me.

Though its individual sentences are cohesive, that passage as a whole is incoherent. (It was created by six different writers, one of whom wrote the first sentence, with the other five sequentially adding one sentence, knowing only the immediately preceding one.) It is incoherent for three reasons:

- The subjects of the sentences are entirely unrelated.
- The sentences share no common themes or ideas.
- No one sentence states what the whole passage is about.

That second point will be discussed in Lesson 5 and that third one in Lesson 7. The rest of this lesson focuses on the first point: shared subjects.

### Subjects and Topics

For 500 years, English teachers have defined *subject* in two ways:

- the "doer" of the action
- what a sentence is "about" or "comments on," its *topic*

In Lessons 2 and 3, we saw why that first definition doesn't work: the subjects of many sentences are not doers. Here, for example, the subject is an action: *The **explosion** was loud.* Here it is a quality: ***Correctness** is not writing's highest virtue.* Here it is just a grammatical placeholder: ***It** was a dark and stormy night.*

But also flawed is that second definition: *a subject is what a sentence is about.* It is flawed because, often, a sentence's topic is stated elsewhere than in the grammatical subject.

For example, none of the grammatical subjects (italicized) in these sentences name their topics (bold).

- The grammatical subject of this sentence is *it*, but its topic is **your claim**, the object of the preposition *for*:

|      *It* is impossible for **your claim** to be proved.

- The grammatical subject of this sentence is *I*, but its topic is **this question**, the object of *to*:

|      In regard to **this question**, *I* believe more research is needed.

- The grammatical subject of this sentence is *There*, but its topic is **our proposal**, the subject of a verb in a dependent clause:

|      *There* is nothing more we can do to ensure that **our proposal** will be accepted.

- The grammatical subject of this sentence is *no one*, but its topic is **such results**, a direct object shifted to the front for emphasis:

|      **Such results** *no one* could have predicted.

## Topics and Coherence

A sentence's topic does not have to be its grammatical subject, although in clear and coherent writing it often is. *Topic* is not a grammatical term but a psychological one: it refers to the idea that readers expect the sentence to be "about" or "comment on." Readers expect to find this idea stated toward the beginning of the sentence, often but not always as the grammatical subject.

Readers consider a passage coherent to the degree that they can quickly and easily see two things:

- the topics of individual sentences and clauses
- how the topics in the passage make up a related set of concepts

How does this passage strike you?

|      Consistent ideas toward the beginnings of sentences, especially in their subjects, help readers understand what a passage is generally about. A sense of coherence arises when a sequence of topics comprises a narrow set of related ideas. But the

context of each sentence is lost by seemingly random shifts of topics. Unfocused paragraphs result when that happens.

The passage seems choppy and disorganized because the topics of its sentences are inconsistent and diffuse. They do not focus our attention on a limited set of related ideas:

Consistent ideas toward the beginnings of sentences, especially in their subjects, help readers understand what a passage is generally about. A sense of coherence arises when a sequence of topics comprises a narrow set of related ideas. But the context of each sentence is lost by seemingly random shifts of topics. Unfocused, even disorganized paragraphs result when that happens.

Now compare that passage to this revision, with the new topics boldfaced:

**Readers** understand what a passage is generally about when **they** see consistent ideas toward the beginnings of sentences, especially in their subjects. **They** feel a passage is coherent when **they** read a sequence of topics that focuses on a narrow set of related ideas. But when **topics** seem to shift randomly, **readers** lose the context of each sentence. When **that** happens, **they** feel they are reading paragraphs that are unfocused and even disorganized.

The subjects of sentences and clauses focus our attention on just two concepts—*readers* and *topics*—and form a strong *topic string*: *readers, they, they, they, topics, readers, that, they [readers]*. That is why this passage seems more coherent.

## How to Revise: Cohesion and Coherence

Here is how to analyze and revise your writing so it is cohesive and coherent.

### 1. Analyze

- a. Underline the first seven or eight words of every sentence in a passage, stopping when you hit a verb.
- b. If you can, underline the first five or six words of every clause in those sentences.

### 2. Assess

- a. Do the underlined words in each sentence contain familiar information that connects the sentence to the preceding ones? If you answer *no*, your sentences are probably not cohesive, and you should revise.
- b. Do the underlined words constitute a relatively small set of related ideas? Even if you see how they are related, will your readers? If you answer *no*, the passage may not seem coherent, and you should revise.
- c. Do the underlined words name the most important characters, real or abstract? Again, if you answer *no*, you should revise.
- d. Imagine giving the passage a title. The words in it are likely to name important topics and should appear in the words you underlined.

### 3. Rewrite

- a. In most of your sentences, although not necessarily all, use subjects to name topics.
- b. Put these subjects/topics close to the beginnings of your sentences.
- c. Be sure that those topics are, in context, familiar to your readers.

## Quick Tip

When you start to draft a new section of a document or paper, list the topics and characters you intend to write about. Include not just flesh-and-blood characters but important concepts as well. As you draft, try to put those characters and concepts into the subjects of most of your sentences. If they do not appear for several sentences, you may have gotten off track.

Likewise, when you read a difficult passage, first skim it quickly to find its main topics and characters. Think about them for a moment. The more sharply you have them in mind, the more easily you will understand the passage.

## Beginning Sentences Well

It is hard to begin a sentence well. Readers want to get to a subject/topic quickly, but too often we begin sentences in ways that keep readers from doing that. It's called *throat-clearing*. Throat-clearing typically begins with metadiscourse (review pp. 51–52) that connects a sentence to the previous one with transitions such as *and*, *but*, or *therefore*:

| And therefore ...

We then add a second kind of metadiscourse that expresses our attitude toward what is coming, words such as *fortunately*, *perhaps*, *allegedly*, *it is important to note*, *for the most part*, or *in a manner of speaking*:

| And therefore, it is important to note ...

Then we indicate time, place, or manner:

| And therefore, it is important to note that, in urban areas since the 1980s ...

Only then do we get to the subject/topic:

| And therefore, it is important to note that, in urban areas since the 1980s, **traffic congestion** has steadily increased.

When you open several sentences like that, your readers have a hard time seeing not just what each sentence is about but also the focus of the whole passage. When you find a sentence with lots of words before its subject/topic, revise:

| ✓ Since the 1980s, therefore, **traffic congestion** in urban areas has steadily increased.

## Here's the Point

Before you begin writing, name the things you are writing about. Those are your *topics*. They should be short, concrete, familiar words, and more often than not, they should name the main characters in your story. Most of your subjects should be topics. Be consistent: do not vary your subjects merely for the sake of variety. Together, your subjects should name the topics that tell your readers what a passage as a whole is about.

## Exercise 4.2

Revise these passages to give them more consistent topic strings. Identify words that name what the passages “comment on” and use those words as subjects of most of the sentences. In 1, words that could be consistent subjects/topics are boldfaced.

1. **Vegetation** covers the earth, except for those areas continuously covered with ice or utterly scorched by continual heat. Richly fertilized plains and river valleys are places where **plants** grow most richly, but also at the edge of perpetual snow in high mountains. The ocean and its edges as well as in and around lakes and swamps are **densely vegetated**. The cracks of busy city sidewalks have **plants** in them as well as in seemingly barren cliffs. Before humans existed, the earth was covered with **vegetation**, and the earth will have **vegetation** long after evolutionary history swallows us up.
2. The power to create and communicate a new message to fit a new experience is not a competence animals have in their natural states. Their genetic codes limit the number and kind of messages that they can communicate. Information about distance, direction, source, and richness of pollen in flowers constitutes the only information that can be communicated by bees, for example. A limited repertoire of messages delivered in the same way, for generation after generation, is characteristic of animals of the same species, in all significant respects.
3. Over the past decade, machine learning has emerged as a prominent subfield of computer science. The use of sophisticated mathematical models to allow computers to perform progressively better on their assigned tasks defines this subfield. The older field of artificial intelligence differs from machine learning in that it was focused more on modeling abstract intelligence than on applying adaptive computational methods to concrete and solvable problems. For this reason, businesses of all sorts have expressed great interest in machine learning.

## Two Qualifications

### Alleged Monotony

A common piece of advice is *Vary how you begin your sentences*. That's a bad idea, especially when you change subjects for no other reason than to make them different.

The worry motivating this advice is that in repeating a subject/topic, you risk boring the reader. That worry though is usually misplaced. When you see the same subject/topic in several sentences *in your own writing*, you might think that passage is monotonous. But that's because you already know what you want to say. Your readers may be grateful for the repetition because it will help them recognize and focus on your main idea.

On the other hand, you might decide to revise if you find you have used exactly the same words for the same topics in exactly the same positions in several sentences. This passage goes over the top in that kind of consistency:

A “**moral climate**” is created when an objectivized moral standard for treating people is accepted by others. A **moral climate** results from norms of behavior that are accepted by society whereby if people conform they are socially approved of, or if they don't they are shunned. In this light, a **moral climate** acts as a reason to refrain from saying or doing things that the community does not support. A **moral climate** encourages individuals to conform to a moral standard and apply that standard to their own circumstances.

In such passages, you can vary a few of the words that refer to a repeated topic:

A “**moral climate**” is created ... **This climate** results ... In this light, **it** acts ... **It** encourages ...

Be cautious though: you are more likely to err by striving for variety than by seeming too repetitious.

## Faked Coherence

Some writers try to fake coherence by lacing their prose with conjunctions like *thus*, *therefore*, *however*, and so on, regardless of whether they signal real logical connections. Here is an example that overuses such transitions:

Because the press is the major medium of interaction between ordinary people and political figures, how it portrays them influences their popularity. **Therefore**, the press should report on politicians objectively. Both reporters and politicians are human, **however**, and subject to error and favoritism. **Also**, people act differently in public than they do in private. **Hence**, to understand a person, even a politician, it is important to know the whole person, including that person's upbringing and education. **Indeed**, from the correspondence with his family, we can learn much about Justin Trudeau, Canada's prime minister.

Experienced writers use these connecting devices, but they depend more on the logical flow of their ideas. They are especially careful not to overuse words like *and*, *also*, *moreover*, *another*, and so on, words that say simply *Here's one more thing*. You need a *but* or *however* when you contradict or qualify what you just said, and you can use a *therefore* or *consequently* to wind up a line of reasoning. But avoid using such words to begin many of your sentences. Your readers don't need them when your sentences are cohesive and the passage they make up is coherent.

## Exercise 4.3 In Your Own Words

In Lesson 3, we noted that you could change the point of view of a passage by changing the characters/topics that appear as subjects in its sentences:

By early 1945, *the Allies* had essentially defeated *Germany* . . .

By early 1945, *Germany* had essentially been defeated by *the Allies* . . .

The first version is written from the point of view of the Allies, the second from that of Germany.

Experiment with the point of view of a passage of your own writing. First, circle words that name characters/topics, wherever they appear. Then underline the subject of every clause. You should see that some characters/topics appear most often as subjects, while others appear most often in other parts of your sentences (likely after the verb). Revise the passage by using those other characters/topics as subjects and by moving characters/topics used as subjects after the verb. What changes do you notice in the feel or even meaning of the passage?

## Exercise 4.4 In Your Own Words

Writers often violate the principle that old information should come before new information because they know their own writing too well: to them, everything can seem like old information. So work with a reader to analyze the flow of old and new information in a passage of your writing. Have a reader go through a passage of your writing and underline every piece of new information. If the beginnings of sentences are underlined, you need to revise. Do so.

## Exercise 4.5 In Your Own Words

Writers use conjunctions and transitions like *also*, *furthermore*, *moreover*, *another*, *but*, *however*, *although*, *nevertheless*, and *consequently* to help readers see the connections among their ideas. But such words can also be used to bluff, to fake connections that aren't really there. Writers are most likely to fake connections when they are struggling to figure out or to express their ideas. Select a piece of writing you are struggling with, and have a reader call your bluffs. Ask your reader to circle words that assert logical connections that don't seem to be there. Then revise as necessary. Work to refine not only your writing but also your ideas and thinking.

## Summing Up

In Lessons 2 and 3, we noted that in clear sentences, the story (characters, actions) aligns with the grammar (subjects, verbs). In this lesson, we added an additional consideration: how to organize the information in a series of sentences so that they not only are clear individually but also connect one to another and hang together as a whole.



Writers can put familiar information and unfamiliar information anywhere in a sentence, but readers prefer to find each kind of information in a particular place. Just as readers prefer characters to align with subjects and actions with verbs, so they expect to find old, familiar information toward the beginning of a sentence, aligned with its topic, and new, unfamiliar information toward the end.

The principles from this lesson are these:

1. Begin sentences with subjects or, sometimes, short introductory phrases that communicate old information, information that your readers are familiar with (boldfaced); give new, unfamiliar information (italicized) toward the ends of sentences:

*Phytoplankton biomass in a local pond ecosystem* was measured over five-years in **our research project**. *An increase in the pond's energy productivity over this period* was suggested by **our measurements**.

- ✓ **Our research project** was to measure *phytoplankton biomass in a local pond ecosystem over five years*. **Our measurements** suggest that *the pond's energy productivity increased over this period*.

2. Through a series of sentences, keep your topics short and reasonably consistent:

**The contrasting business models of nonprofit and for-profit institutions of higher education** are examined in this study. **Faculty costs and the use of online technologies in instruction** are shown to be treated very differently between the two models. **A proposal for blending both models to realize the benefits of each** will be developed from this study.

- ✓ In this study, **we** examine the contrasting business models of nonprofit and for-profit institutions of higher education. **The two models**, we show, differ greatly in how **they** treat faculty costs and the use of online technologies in instruction. **We** will develop from this study a proposal for blending the benefits of both models to realize the benefits of each.

# Lesson 5

## Emphasis

*All's well that ends well.*  
—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

If you consistently write sentences whose subjects name a few central characters and topics and whose verbs express important actions, you'll likely get the other parts of those sentences right. In the process, you will create a passage that is both cohesive and coherent. But just as the first few words of a sentence are worth special attention, so are the last few. The endings of your sentences also influence readers' sense not only of their individual clarity and strength but also of their collective cohesion and coherence.

### Managing Complexity: Simple Before Complex

When readers build up momentum in the first nine or ten words of a sentence, they more easily get through complicated material that follows. Compare:

- 1a. A sociometric and actuarial analysis of city population growth over the last six decades to anticipate future changes in social service needs is the subject of this study.
- ✓ 1b. This study analyzes the growth of the city's population over the last six decades, using sociometric and actuarial methods to anticipate future changes in its need for social services.

As we start **1a**, we struggle to understand its technical terms at the same time we are hacking through a subject twenty-two words long. In **1b**, we go through just three words to get past the subject and verb and twelve more before we hit a term—*sociometric*—that might slow us down. By that point we have enough momentum to carry us through the complexity to the sentence's end. That's because **1b** begins simply and saves its more complex grammatical constructions and concepts for later.

## Complex Grammar

Which of these two sentences do you prefer?

- 2a.** Philosopher Hannah Arendt's argument that freedom does not exist as an abstraction apart from concrete human action appears in her book *The Human Condition*.
- 2b.** In her book *The Human Condition*, philosopher Hannah Arendt argues that freedom does not exist as an abstraction apart from concrete human action.

Most readers prefer **2b** because it begins simply with a short introductory phrase followed by a short subject and a specific verb and then moves toward grammatical complexity. We discussed that issue in Lesson 4.

## Complex Meaning

Another kind of complexity is in the meanings of words, especially technical terms. Compare these two passages:

- 3a.** The role of calcium blockers in the control of cardiac irregularity can be seen through an understanding of the role of calcium in the activation of muscle cells. The regulatory proteins actin, myosin, tropomyosin, and troponin make up the sarcomere, the basic unit of muscle contraction. The energy-producing, or ATPase, protein myosin makes up its thick filament, while actin, tropomyosin, and troponin make up its thin filament. Interaction of myosin and actin triggers muscle contraction.
- ✓ **3b.** When a muscle contracts, it uses calcium. We must therefore understand how calcium affects muscle cells to understand how cardiac irregularity is controlled by drugs called calcium blockers. The basic unit of muscle contraction is the sarcomere. It has two filaments, one thin and one thick. Those filaments consist of four proteins that regulate contraction: actin, tropomyosin, and troponin in the thin filament and myosin in the thick one. Muscles contract when the protein actin in the thin filament interacts with myosin, an energy-producing or ATPase protein, in the thick filament.

Both passages use the same technical terms, but **3b** is clearer to those who know nothing about the chemistry of muscles.

Those passages differ in two ways. First, information that is only implicit in **3a** is stated explicitly in **3b**. More important, almost all the technical terms in **3a** are toward the beginnings of sentences and clauses, increasing the passage's difficulty:

The role of **calcium blockers** in the control of **cardiac irregularity** can be seen through an understanding of the role of calcium in the activation of muscle cells.

The **regulatory proteins actin, myosin, tropomyosin, and troponin** make up the **sarcomere**, the basic unit of muscle contraction.

The **energy-producing, or ATPase, protein myosin** makes up its thick filament, while **actin, tropomyosin, and troponin** make up its thin filament.

**Interaction of myosin and actin** triggers muscle contraction.

In **3b**, those technical terms appear toward the ends of sentences:

... uses **calcium**.

... is controlled by drugs called **calcium blockers**.

... is the **sarcomere**.

... four proteins that regulate contraction: **actin, tropomyosin, and troponin** in the thin filament and **myosin** in the thick one.

... **myosin, an energy-producing or ATPase protein**, in the thick filament.

This way of introducing unfamiliar terms works even for prose intended for professional readers. In this next passage, from the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the writer deliberately uses metadiscourse (italicized) just to put the new technical term at the end:

The incubation of peripheral-blood lymphocytes with a lymphokine, interleukin-2, generates lymphoid cells that can lyse fresh, noncultured, natural-killer-cell-resistant tumor cells but not normal cells. *We term these cells* **lymphokine-activated killer (LAK) cells**.

## Here's the Point

Your readers want you to organize your sentences to help them manage two kinds of difficulty:

- long and complex phrases and clauses
- new information, particularly unfamiliar technical terms

Your sentences should usually begin with elements that are relatively short, simple (not simplistic), and direct: perhaps a short introductory phrase or clause, followed by a short, concrete subject, followed by a verb expressing a specific action. After the verb, the sentence can go on for several lines if it is well constructed (see Lessons 9 and 10). The general principle is to carry the reader not from complexity to simplicity but from simplicity to complexity.

## Emphasis and Stress

In the last lesson, we said that the first few words of a sentence are important because they state its topic, what the sentence is “about” or “comments on.” The last few words of a sentence are also important because they receive special emphasis.

You can sense that emphasis when you hear your voice rise at the end of a sentence to accentuate one syllable more strongly than the others:

| ... more strongly than the ó-thers.

We'll call this most emphatic part of a sentence its *stress*.

How you manage this stress position helps establish the voice readers hear in your writing. If you end a sentence with words that carry little meaning, it will seem to finish weakly:

Climate change could raise sea levels to a point where much of the world's low-lying coastal areas would disappear, **according to most atmospheric scientists**.

- ✓ According to most atmospheric scientists, climate change could raise sea levels to a point where much of the world's low-lying coastal areas **would disappear**.

In Lessons 3 and 4, we saw how different subjects/topics create different points of view (pp. 48–49, 64–65). You can similarly manage your endings to emphasize important themes.

Compare these passages. The original laments the way universities in the 1990s responded to a decline in the number of potential students—by becoming increasingly commercial:

The universities were going to have to pursue students much **as businesses pursue customers**. They were going to have to treat their prospective students **as potential buyers**. And they were going to have to treat their existing students **as customers too**, for students **can always switch brands**.

—Mark Edmundson, *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education*

If we move those references to businesses, customers, buyers, and brands out of the sentences' ends, we blunt the passage's edge:

The universities were going to have to act like **businesses pursuing customers** to attract prospective students. And because **customers can always switch brands**, universities were going to have to take the same approach with their existing students too.

In some cases, changing a sentence's stress can even change its meaning. Which company would you invest in?

Although the company's sales remain strong, **its stock price has slipped**.

Although the company's stock price has slipped, **its sales remain strong**.

According to that first sentence, the company is in trouble; according to the second, it's a bargain.

## Here's the Point

Just as we look to the first few words of a sentence for what a sentence is about—its *topic*—so we look to the last few words for special emphasis: its *stress*. You can arrange a sentence to emphasize particular words that you want readers to hear stressed and thereby note as particularly significant.

## How To Revise: Stress

If you have managed your subjects and topics well, you will naturally put the words you want to emphasize toward the ends of your sentences. To test this, read your sentence aloud and, as you reach the last three or four words, tap your finger hard as if emphasizing them in a speech. If you tap on words that do not deserve strong emphasis, look for words that do. Then put those words closer to the end. Here are some ways to do that.

### Three Tactical Revisions

#### 1. Trim the end.

Sociobiologists claim that our genes control our social behavior **in the way we act in situations we are in every day**.

Since *social behavior* means *the way we act in situations ...*, we can drop everything after *behavior*:

- ✓ Sociobiologists claim that our genes **control our social behavior**.

#### 2. Shift peripheral ideas to the left.

The data offered to prove ESP are weak, **for the most part**.

- ✓ **For the most part**, the data offered to prove ESP are weak.

Particularly avoid ending with anticlimactic metadiscourse:

Job opportunities in heavy manufacturing are getting scarcer, **it must be remembered**.

- ✓ **It must be remembered** that job opportunities in heavy manufacturing are getting scarcer.

#### 3. Shift new information to the right.

**Questions about the ethics of withdrawing intravenous feeding** are more difficult [than something just mentioned].

- ✓ More difficult [than something just mentioned] are **questions about the ethics of withdrawing intravenous feeding**.

## Six Syntactic Devices to Emphasize the Right Words

There are several syntactic devices that let you manage what words and information get stressed in a sentence. (You just read one of them.)

1. **There shift** Some editors and teachers discourage all *there is/there are* constructions because they result in “empty” subjects. But using them lets you shift the words in a subject to the right to emphasize them. Compare:

**Several syntactic devices** let you manage what words and information get stressed in a sentence.

- ✓ *There are* **several syntactic devices** that let you manage what words and information get stressed in a sentence.

That phrase *several syntactic devices* is no longer the grammatical subject, but because it now appears after the verb, it carries more stress. In fact, experienced writers commonly begin a paragraph with *there* to introduce new topics and concepts that they develop in sentences that follow.

2. **Passives** Again, a passive verb lets you flip a subject and direct object to get familiar and new information in the right order. Compare these sentences:

Some claim that **our genes** influence active aspects of behavior that we think are learned. **Our genes**, for example, seem to determine ...

- ✓ Some claim that aspects of behavior that we think are learned are in fact influenced passive by **our genes**. **Our genes**, for example, seem to determine ...

3. **What shift** This is another device that shifts a part of the sentence to the right, thereby emphasizing it more:

We need a monetary policy that would end fluctuations in money supply, unemployment, and inflation.

- ✓ **What** we need **is** a monetary policy that would end fluctuations in money supply, unemployment, and inflation.

4. **It shift** When your subject is a long noun clause, you can move it to the end of the sentence and start with *it*:

**That oil prices would be set by OPEC** once seemed inevitable.

- ✓ *It* once seemed inevitable **that oil prices would be set by OPEC**.

5. **Not only X, but (also) Y (as well)** In this next pair, note how the *but also* emphasizes the last element of the pair:

We must clarify these issues and **develop trust**.

- ✓ We must *not only* clarify these issues *but also* **develop trust**.

Unless you have a reason to emphasize the negative, end with the positive:

The point is to highlight our success, **not to emphasize our failures**.

- ✓ The point is not to emphasize our failures but **to highlight our success**.

**6. Pronoun substitution** This is a fine point: a sentence can end flatly when you repeat a word that you used just a few words before at the end of a sentence, because the voice we hear in our mind's ear drops off at the end. If you read aloud the preceding sentence, this one, and the next, you can hear that drop at the end of each sentence. To avoid that kind of flatness, rewrite or use a pronoun (*italicized*) instead of repeating the word at the end of the sentence. For example:

A sentence will seem to end flatly if at its end you use a word that you used just a few words before, because when you repeat that word, your voice **drops**. Instead of repeating the noun, use a **pronoun**. The reader will at least hear emphasis on the word just **before it**.

Occasionally, you can just delete words that repeat earlier ones:

It is sometimes possible to represent a complex idea in a simple sentence, but more often you cannot **represent it in that kind of sentence**.

- ✓ It is sometimes possible to represent a complex idea in a simple sentence, but more often you cannot.

A handful of devices allow writers to end their sentences with special elegance. We will discuss those in Lesson 10.

## Quick Tip

You can easily check whether you have stressed the right words by reading your sentences aloud: as you speak the last few words, raise your voice and tap the table with your fingers. If you've stressed the wrong words, your voice and table thumping will feel wrong. If you've stressed the right words, your voice and table thumping (underlined) will feel right:

It is sometimes possible to represent a complex idea in a simple sentence, but **more often you cannot**.

## Exercise 5.1

Revise these sentences to emphasize the right words. In the first three, words that should be stressed are boldfaced. Then eliminate wordiness, nominalizations, and so on.

1. Their quarterback's tendency **to fumble near the goal line** is their biggest weakness as a football team, in my opinion at least.
2. A new political philosophy that could affect our society **well into the twenty-first century** may emerge from these studies.



3. There are **limited** opportunities for faculty to work with individual students in large colleges and universities.
4. Building suburban housing developments in floodplains has led to the existence of extensive and widespread flooding and economic disaster in parts of our country in recent years, it is now clear.
5. The teacher who makes an assignment of a long final term paper at the end of the semester and who then gives only a grade and nothing else such as a critical comment is a common object of complaint among students at the college level.
6. Renting textbooks rather than buying them for basic required courses such as mathematics, foreign languages, and English whose textbooks do not go through yearly changes is feasible, however, economically speaking.
7. The reason for our company's success is that long-term growth and not short-term gains has been our focus, in terms of our approach.
8. The intention of the General Data Protection Regulation was to provide privacy protection to citizens of the European Union, but people around the world are also experiencing benefits from the regulation.

## Exercise 5.2

Revise these passages so that their sentences begin with appropriate topics and end with appropriate emphasis.

1. Athens's catastrophic Sicilian Invasion is the most important event in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Three quarters of the history is devoted to setting up the invasion because of this. Through the step-by-step decline in Athenian society that Thucydides describes, we can see how he chose to anticipate the Sicilian Invasion. The inevitability that we associate with the tragic drama is the basic reason for the need to anticipate the invasion.
2. Whether the date an operation intends to close down might be part of management's "duty to disclose" during contract bargaining is the issue here, it would appear. The minimization of conflict is the central rationale for the duty that management has to bargain in good faith. In order to allow the union to put forth proposals on behalf of its members, companies are obligated to disclose major changes in an operation during bargaining, though the case law is scanty on this matter.
3. A combination of environmental and political factors caused the rapid decline of the Mayan civilization in the ninth century, most likely. Severe economic distress resulted from rapid population growth and prolonged drought in this period. In addition, the Maya's ability to respond to these circumstances was hindered by constant warfare and a rigid system of monarchic rule. Much of the Maya's territory was almost entirely depopulated within the century.

## Topics, Stress, Themes, and Coherence

There is one more function performed by the stress of certain sentences, one that helps readers find whole passages coherent. As we saw in the last lesson, readers take the clearest topic to be a short noun phrase that comes early in a sentence, usually as its subject. That's why most of us judge this next paragraph to be unfocused: its sentences seem to open randomly, from no consistent point of view:

4a. Great strides in the early and accurate diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease have been made in recent years. Not too long ago, senility in an older patient who seemed to be losing touch with reality was often confused with Alzheimer's. Genetic clues have become the basis of newer and more reliable tests in the last few years, however. The risk of human tragedy of another kind, though, has resulted from the increasing accuracy of these tests: predictions about susceptibility to Alzheimer's have become possible long before the appearance of any overt symptoms. At that point, an apparently healthy person could be devastated by such an early diagnosis.

If we revise that paragraph to make the topics more consistent, we also make it more coherent (topics are boldfaced):

✓ 4b. In recent years, **researchers** have made great strides in the early and accurate diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. Not too long ago, when **a physician** examined an older patient who seemed out of touch with reality, **she** had to guess whether the **person** was senile or had Alzheimer's. In the past few years, however, **physicians** have been able to use new and more reliable tests focusing on genetic clues. But in **the accuracy of these new tests** lies the risk of another kind of human tragedy: **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.

The paragraph now focuses on just two topics: researchers/physicians and testing/diagnosis.

But there is one more revision that would make it more coherent still. Readers expect the opening sentence or two of a passage to announce its key concepts, and they look for those concepts in the last few words of those opening sentences, especially the first. Therefore, follow this principle:

Put key words in the stress position of a passage's *first* sentence to emphasize the key concepts it will repeat and develop.

The first sentence of that revised paragraph stresses advances in diagnosis: ... *the early and accurate diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease*. The passage, however, is not about diagnosis but its risks. That organizing concept, though, does not appear

until more than halfway through the paragraph. Readers would grasp the point of the paragraph better if *all* of its key concepts appeared in the first sentence, *specifically toward its end, in its stress position*.

Here is a new first sentence for a version of the paragraph that would help readers focus on the key concepts not just of *Alzheimer's* and *new diagnoses* but also of *a new problem* and *informing those most at risk*:

In recent years, researchers have made great strides in the early and accurate diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, but those **diagnoses** have raised **a new problem** about **informing those most at risk who show no symptoms of it**.

We can call those key concepts that run through a passage its *themes*.

Look at the highlighted words in the passage below one more time:

- The gold words are about testing.
- The pink words are about mental states.
- The green words are about a new problem.

Each of those themes is announced toward the end of the new opening sentence, especially the theme of the new problem.

- ✓ **4c.** In recent years, researchers have made great strides in the early and accurate **diagnosis** of **Alzheimer's disease**, but those **diagnoses** have raised **a new problem** about **informing those most at risk who show no symptoms of it**. 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 **only senile**. In the past few years, however, physicians have been able to use **new and more reliable tests** focusing on genetic clues. But in the accuracy of these **new tests** lies the **risk of another kind of human tragedy**: 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**.

That passage now coheres, or hangs together, for three reasons:

- Its topics consistently focus on physicians and diagnosis.
- Running through it are strings of words that focus on the themes of (1) tests, (2) mental conditions, and (3) a new problem.
- And no less important, the opening sentence helps us notice those three themes by emphasizing them at its end.

Again, signal a passage's key concepts in the stress positions of its opening sentences, especially the first. This principle applies to fairly long paragraphs (short, introductory, or transitional paragraphs follow different patterns). It also applies to longer passages, even whole documents.

## Here's the Point

We depend on concepts running through a passage to create a sense of its coherence. You help readers identify those concepts in two ways:

- Repeat those that name characters as topics of sentences, usually as subjects.
- Repeat others as themes elsewhere in a passage, in nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

Readers are more likely to notice those themes if you emphasize them at the end of the sentence that introduces the passage.

## Quick Tip

For a paragraph more than five or six sentences long, underline the sentence that you think best introduces or frames the rest of the paragraph. If you can't do that quickly, the paragraph probably has a problem. If you can, circle the important words in the sentence. Those words should sound like a title for the paragraph. If they do not, your paragraph may confuse your readers. We will return to this matter in Lesson 7.

## Exercise 5.3 In Your Own Words

Read a page of your own writing aloud, raising your voice and tapping your fingers at the ends of your sentences (as suggested in the Quick Tip on page 77). What do you notice? How often do you seem to be stressing the wrong words and how often the right ones? Can you detect any patterns? How does your meaning change when you inadvertently stress the wrong words?

## Exercise 5.4 In Your Own Words

Have a reader use the Three Tactical Revisions on page 75 (“trim the end,” “shift peripheral ideas to the left,” or “shift new information to the right”) to revise at least four or five sentences of your writing.

- In trimming the ends of sentences, did your reader cut material that you thought was necessary?
- Did your reader treat as peripheral ideas that you thought were important?
- Are you surprised by what your reader classified as “new information”?

Which revisions improved your writing, and which did not? Why?

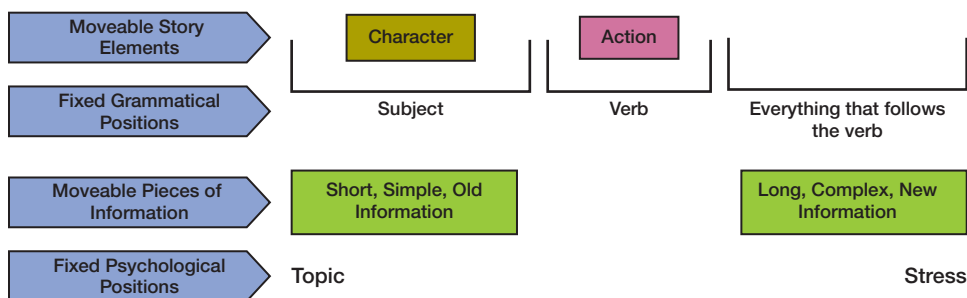
## A Model for Sentences

Over these past four lessons, we have been building up a model you can use to manage your sentences so that your readers will find them clear and so that they will add up to passages that are cohesive and coherent.

In Lessons 2 and 3, we noted that a sentence has relatively fixed grammatical positions—the subject and verb—and moveable story elements: characters and actions. Our advice was to align characters with subjects and important actions with verbs.

In Lessons 4 and 5, we focused on organizing the information in your sentences so that readers can most easily understand them and see what they add up to as a whole. Like characters and actions, any piece of information could appear almost anywhere. But like those subject and verb positions, the topic and stress positions of a sentence are relatively fixed: readers expect to find old, familiar information at the beginning of a sentence along with its topic, and new, unfamiliar information toward the end, where it receives stress or emphasis. We call the topic and stress positions *psychological* positions because they concern not just how easily readers understand a sentence but what they *focus on* or *attend to* in it.

We can graphically integrate the principles from these four lessons:



In other words, you can think of a sentence in layers. Your writing will seem clearest and most coherent when you align them: characters as subjects, actions as verbs, familiar information that signals the topic near the beginning, new information that you want to emphasize or stress toward the end.

## Summing Up

1. Use the end of a sentence to introduce long, complex, or otherwise difficult-to-process material, particularly unfamiliar technical terms and new information.

A determination of involvement of lipid-linked saccharides in the assembly of oligosaccharide chains of ovalbumin *in vivo* was the principal aim of this study. *In vitro* and *in vivo* studies utilizing oviduct membrane

**preparations and oviduct slices and the antibiotic tunicamycin** were undertaken to accomplish this.

- ✓ The principal aim of this study was to determine how **lipid-linked saccharides are involved in the assembly of oligosaccharide chains of ovalbumin *in vivo***. To accomplish this, studies were undertaken *in vitro* and *in vivo*, **utilizing the antibiotic tunicamycin on preparations of oviduct membrane and on oviduct slices**.

2. Use the stress position at the very end for words that you want your readers to hear emphasized in their mind's ear:

The universities were going to have to act like businesses pursuing customers **to attract prospective students**.

- ✓ The universities were going to have to pursue students much **as businesses pursue customers**.

—Mark Edmundson

3. Use the stress position of a sentence that introduces a passage to announce the key themes that the rest of the passage will develop:

- ✓ In recent years, researchers have made great strides in the early and accurate **diagnosis** of **Alzheimer's disease**, but those **diagnoses** have raised **a new problem** about **informing those most at risk who show no symptoms of it**. 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 **only senile**. In the past few years, however, physicians have been able to use **new and more reliable tests** focusing on genetic clues. But in the accuracy of these **new tests** lies the **risk of another kind of human tragedy**: 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**.

Here, in sum, are the main principles we developed in Part 2. Two concern how clear sentences will seem to readers:

- Make important actions verbs.
- Make main characters the subjects of sentences.

Two explain how sentences flow together:

- Begin sentences with old or familiar information; put new or unfamiliar information later.
- Begin sentences with simple information; put complex information later.

Two explain how to orient readers and focus their attention:

- Signal what a sentence is about—the topic—at its beginning.
- Put words to be emphasized—the stress—at the end.

*This page is intentionally left blank*

PART THREE

---

# Clarity of Form

*The beginning is half of the whole.*

—PLATO



# Lesson 6

## Framing Documents

*A problem well-put is half solved.*

—JOHN DEWEY

The principles discussed in Part Two apply to sentences and short passages in all kinds of writing. We now turn in Part Three to principles that apply to whole documents and sections of documents. While these principles are relevant to most kinds of expository and argumentative writing, our focus will be on how they apply to the kinds of writing people do as students, as scholars and researchers, and on the job.

Of course, the various *genres* of academic and professional writing—critical essays, research reports, legal briefs, business proposals, even op-eds—differ from one another in many ways. But they also share features in common, features readers rely on to help them follow and make sense of what they read.

This lesson addresses two of the most important of these: introductions and conclusions. Lesson 7 explains things you can do throughout a piece of writing to lead readers to experience it as organized and coherent. In both lessons, we take examples mainly from academic genres, but the advice and principles apply to professional genres as well.

### Framing Introductions to Help Readers

Writers working in academic and professional contexts generally want to inform or persuade readers who know less than they do, which means they are vulnerable to thinking their writing is clear when their readers won't. Also, such writers can't assume their readers are already deeply invested in what they have to say. Accordingly, when you write in these contexts, you face a double challenge:

- to let readers know what to expect so that they can read more knowledgeably
- to motivate readers so that they want to read carefully

You do these things best when you write not just about a *topic* that interests *you* but about a *problem* that is important to *your readers*. If they don't yet care—or even know—about that problem, you have to show them why they should.

Such readers will ask *So what?* That's a fair question, and you get one shot at answering it: in your introduction. That's where you must motivate readers to see your problem as their own.

For example, read this introduction (all these examples are much shorter than typical ones):

**1a.** Recycling—the practice of separating from ordinary trash specific materials that can be made into new products—is so habitual that many people try to recycle things that aren't actually recyclable: plastic bags, paper coffee cups, Styrofoam, greasy pizza boxes, and more. Such “aspirational recycling” is drawing the attention of waste management professionals, policy makers, and environmental advocates alike.

That introduction offers a topic, aspirational recycling, but does not motivate us to care about it. Unless a reader is already interested in the issue, she may shrug and ask *So what? Why should I care that people try to recycle stuff they can't?*

Contrast that introduction with this one. It tells us why aspirational recycling is a *problem* worth our attention:

**1b.** Recycling—the practice of separating from ordinary trash specific materials that can be made into new products—is today an expected and even habitual behavior: to toss an aluminium can in an ordinary trash bin is as unthinkable as it would be to toss it into the street or a neighbor's yard. But many people, out of ignorance or enthusiasm, try to recycle things that aren't actually recyclable: plastic bags, paper coffee cups, Styrofoam, greasy pizza boxes, and more. Such “aspirational recycling” has major environmental consequences. By making waste collected for recycling more difficult or even impossible to process, it can result in whole loads of waste intended for recycling going to the landfill instead. We can address the causes of aspirational recycling through better education and better labeling of recycling bins. Thanks to the educational campaigns of the past, people know they should recycle. Now, we need to build on this success by creating more knowledgeable and discriminating recyclers. To this end, recycling bins should be labeled not just with the familiar triangle of arrows that is recycling's universal symbol, but with specific information about what kinds of things can—and can't—be recycled. Pilot programs in several municipalities show that this simple step can reduce aspirational recycling significantly.

As short as that is, **1b** has the three parts that appear in most introductions. Each part has a role in motivating a reader to read on. The parts are these:

#### Shared Context—Problem—Solution/Main Point/Claim

Recycling ... a neighbor's yard. shared context But many people ... the landfill instead. problem We can address ... aspirational recycling significantly. solution/main point/claim

## Establishing a Shared Context

Most pieces of writing open with a shared context, as does **1b**. In this example, the shared context is an observation about a common belief, practice, or perception, but it might have been historical background, an event, or anything else that introduces the topic in a way that readers will readily accept.

**Common Belief, Practice, or Perception:** Recycling—the practice of separating from ordinary trash specific materials that can be made into new products—is today an expected and even habitual behavior: to toss an aluminium can in an ordinary trash bin is as unthinkable as it would be to toss it into the street or a neighbor's yard. shared context But many people ...

**Historical Background:** In the 1970s, recycling—the practice of separating from ordinary trash specific materials that can be made into new products—was unfamiliar, even strange. Only a few municipalities supported it, and many people found it confusing and inconvenient. As society grew more environmentally conscious, though, recycling went from novelty to norm. shared context But many people ...

**Event:** Every November 15, thousands of people gather at events across the country to celebrate America Recycles Day. The popularity of these events indicates how ordinary the practice of recycling has become. It is now just something that people do as a matter of course. shared context But many people ...

These forms of shared context play a special role in motivating readers to read on. In **1b**, we wanted you to accept that context as a seemingly unproblematic base for thinking about recycling *just so that we could then challenge it*. We set you up so that we could say, in effect, *You may think you know the whole story, but you don't*. That *but* signals the coming qualification:

| ... or a neighbor's yard. shared context **But many people, out of ignorance or enthusiasm, try to recycle things that aren't actually recyclable ...**

In other words, recycling seems unproblematic, *but something about it turns out not to be*. We wanted that small surprise to motivate you to go on reading.

No opening move is more common among experienced writers: state a seeming truth, then qualify or even reject it. You can find countless examples in newspapers, magazines, business documents, and especially professional journals. This opening context can be a sentence or two, as it is here, but it can also be paragraphs long. Articles in academic or professional journals, for example, often begin with a shared context called a *literature review*, a survey of what prior researchers have said that the writer will qualify or correct.

## Stating the Problem

Sometimes when writers address specialized readers, they might skip the shared context and jump directly to the second part of an introduction: the statement of a problem. More commonly, though, they open with a shared

context to set up this problem statement, introducing it with a word such as *but* or *however*:

... a neighbor's yard. shared context **But** many people, out of ignorance or enthusiasm, try to recycle things that aren't actually recyclable: plastic bags, paper coffee cups, Styrofoam, greasy pizza boxes, and more. Such "aspirational recycling" has major environmental consequences. By making waste collected for recycling more difficult or even impossible to process, it can result in whole loads of waste intended for recycling going to the landfill instead. problem We can address ...

## The Two Parts of a Problem

For readers to think that something is a problem, it must have two parts:

- The first part is some *condition* or *situation*: pollution, rising tuition, traffic congestion, anything that has the potential to cause trouble.
- The second part is the *intolerable consequence* of that condition, a *cost* that readers don't want to pay.

That cost is what motivates readers. They want to eliminate or at least ameliorate it because it makes them unhappy. To identify the cost of a problem, imagine someone asking *So what?* after you state its condition. Answer that question and you have found the cost:

But many people, out of ignorance or enthusiasm, try to recycle things that aren't actually recyclable: plastic bags, paper coffee cups, Styrofoam, greasy pizza boxes, and more. condition *So what?* Such "aspirational recycling" has major environmental consequences. By making waste collected for recycling more difficult or even impossible to process, it can result in whole loads of waste intended for recycling going to the landfill instead. cost of the condition

The condition is aspirational recycling, the fact that many people try to recycle things they can't; the cost is increased landfill use. Readers have to see the condition and cost *together* before they recognize a problem.

## Two Kinds of Problems: Practical and Conceptual

There are two kinds of problems, and each motivates readers in a different way. You have to write about them differently.

- A *practical* problem concerns a condition or situation in the world and demands an *action* as its solution. That people often try to recycle things they can't is a practical problem.
- A *conceptual* problem concerns what we think about something and demands a *change in understanding* as its solution. That we don't know how best to discourage this practice is a conceptual problem.

Writers outside the academic world most often address practical problems; writers inside it most often address conceptual ones.

**Practical Problems** We usually name a practical problem in a word or two: *cancer, unemployment, voter apathy, aspirational recycling*. But that's a shorthand. Those terms name only the condition: they say nothing about costs. Most conditions sound like trouble, but anything can be the condition of a problem if its palpable costs make you unhappy. If winning the lottery made you suffer the loss of friends and family, it would be a practical problem.

You may think that the costs of some problems are too obvious to state. But you cannot count on readers seeing the problem as you do, for two reasons. First, when you know more about your topic than your readers do, you will recognize the costs of a condition or situation better than they will. What goes without saying for you might need to be spelled out for them. Second, different types of readers can see different costs in a given condition or situation. Where you see environmental degradation, the executive of a waste management company might see increased processing costs. More callous readers might see no costs at all: *Who cares that some people don't recycle properly? I don't live by a landfill, so what's it to me?* To appeal to such readers, you have to make them see how your condition or situation affects them. If you can't describe the costs you see so that they matter *to your readers*, they won't care about what you've written.

**Conceptual Problems** A conceptual problem has the same two parts as a practical one: a condition and its costs. But beyond that, the two sorts of problem are very different.

The condition of a conceptual problem is always something that we do not know or understand. We can express this condition as a question: *What is the mass of the universe? Why does the hair on your head keep growing, but the hair on your legs doesn't?*

The cost of a conceptual problem is not tangible difficulty, pain, suffering, or loss; it is the dissatisfaction we feel because we don't understand something important to us. We can express this cost as something *more important* that readers don't know, as *another, larger question*:

Cosmologists don't know the mass of the universe. condition *So what?* Well, if they knew, they might figure out something more important: Will time and space go on forever, or will they end? And if they do, when and how? cost/larger question

Biologists don't know why some hair keeps growing and other hair stops. condition *So what?* If they knew, they might understand something more important: What turns growth on and off? cost/larger question

Mental health researchers don't know whether bipolar disorder has a genetic component. condition *So what?* Well, if they knew, they might be able to figure out something more important: How can that condition best be tested for and treated? cost/larger question

Sometimes, as in the last example, the larger question is about something readers do not know how to do. That's a special kind of conceptual problem called

an *applied problem* because it concerns our ignorance about how best to act. Conceptual problems in professional contexts are almost always applied problems. But an applied problem is still a conceptual problem because its solution is not the action itself but the knowledge that enables it.

Think of it like this: for a conceptual problem, you answer a small question so that your answer contributes to answering a larger, more important one. Readers are motivated because your small question inherits its importance from that larger one.

## Here's the Point

Like your readers, you will usually be more motivated by large questions. But limited resources—time, funding, knowledge, skill, pages—may keep you from addressing a large question satisfactorily. So you have to find a question you *can* answer. When you plan your paper, look for a question that is small enough to answer but is also connected to another question large enough for you *and your readers* to care about.

## Stating the Solution

The solution is your main point or claim. We solve practical problems with action: readers (or someone) must *change what they do*. We solve conceptual problems with information: readers (or someone) must *change what they think*. Your answer to a small question then helps readers understand a larger one.

***Practical Problems: What We Should Do*** To solve a practical problem, you must propose that the reader (or someone) *do* something to change a condition in the world:

... recycling going to the landfill instead. problem **We can address the causes of aspirational recycling through better education and better labeling of recycling bins. Thanks to the educational campaigns of the past, people know they should recycle. Now, we need to build on this success by creating more knowledgeable and discriminating recyclers. To this end, recycling bins should be labeled not just with the familiar triangle of arrows that is recycling's universal symbol, but with specific information about what kinds of things can—and can't—be recycled. Pilot programs in several municipalities show that this simple step can reduce aspirational recycling significantly.** solution/point

***Conceptual Problems: What We Should Think*** To solve a conceptual problem, you must state something you want readers to *understand* or *believe*:

But we don't know whether getting people to think about recycling, rather than just doing it out of habit, will lead them to stop recycling at all. If we knew that, we could design interventions that promise to curtail aspirational recycling without also discouraging recycling generally. problem **This study reports on our**

analysis of the efforts of three universities to address aspirational recycling among students through informational emails and better labeling of recycling receptacles. We found that while emails had negligible impact on student behavior, marking receptacles with detailed graphics showing the types of materials that can be recycled reduced aspirational recycling by almost thirty-five percent. solution/point

Think of it this way: when you solve a practical problem, you change *something in the world*; when you solve a conceptual problem, you change *someone's mind*.

## Here's the Point

Some writers, especially student writers, believe the impact of their ideas depends on how forcefully they state them. But a strong main point, claim, or thesis alone will not make you persuasive. Readers will find your claims most meaningful if you present them as solutions to problems, practical or conceptual, that your readers care about.

## Quick Tip

When you read an academic book or article, look first for the implied question in its problem statement and then for its main claim, which answers that question. That will help focus your reading. If you don't find a question in the introduction, look for one in the conclusion. If that fails, find the main claim and ask yourself *What question does this answer?* The more you understand *why* a writer is telling you something, the better you will understand what she writes.

## Another Part: Prelude

What best motivates readers is a problem in need of a solution, but a catchy opening can enliven your writing and vividly introduce your central themes. To name this device, we can use a musical term: *prelude*. Writers in the natural and social sciences rarely use preludes. They are more common in the humanities and most common in writing for the general public.

Here are three preludes that could establish key themes in a paper about recycling.

### 1. A Quotation

"All the human and animal manure which the world wastes, restored to the land instead of being cast into the water, would suffice to nourish the world."

—Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*

### 2. An Illustrative Anecdote

Last semester, my English professor ordered pizza to celebrate the last day of class. It seemed a shame to put all those cardboard pizza boxes into the trash, so we put them into the paper recycling bin instead.

### 3. A Striking Fact

From 2011 to 2017, the average market value of a ton of recycling dropped from almost \$190 to just over \$100. This decline was due not only to market forces but also to contamination by nonrecyclable materials.

We can combine all three:

“All the human and animal manure which the world wastes,” observes Victor Hugo in his 1862 novel *Les Misérables*, “restored to the land instead of being cast into the water, would suffice to nourish the world.” Although Hugo was writing in the mid-nineteenth century, he captures the impulse that motivates today’s recycling movement. <sup>quotation</sup> Last semester, for example, my English professor ordered pizza to celebrate the last day of class. It seemed a shame to put all those cardboard pizza boxes into the trash, so we put them into the paper recycling bin instead. Little did we know that we were doing more harm than good. <sup>anecdote</sup> In fact, such instances of “aspirational recycling”—well-intended but misguided attempts to recycle materials that are not recyclable—have contributed to a recent erosion in the value of recycled materials, from an average of almost \$190 a ton in 2011 to just over \$100 a ton in 2017. <sup>striking fact</sup>

Recycling is today an expected and even habitual behavior ... <sup>shared context</sup> But many people ... <sup>problem</sup>

Here, then, is a general plan for your introductions:

<b>Prelude</b>	Catch your readers' attention (optional)				
<b>Shared Context</b>	Establish a shared understanding with your readers that you will challenge in some way				
<b>Problem</b>	Unsettle some aspect of the shared context (two parts): <table> <tr> <td><b>Condition</b></td><td>Identify something in the world that needs to be changed (practical problems), or acknowledge something we don't know (conceptual problems)</td></tr> <tr> <td><b>Cost</b></td><td>Note the trouble caused by the condition (practical problems) or our inability to understand something more important (conceptual problems)</td></tr> </table>	<b>Condition</b>	Identify something in the world that needs to be changed (practical problems), or acknowledge something we don't know (conceptual problems)	<b>Cost</b>	Note the trouble caused by the condition (practical problems) or our inability to understand something more important (conceptual problems)
<b>Condition</b>	Identify something in the world that needs to be changed (practical problems), or acknowledge something we don't know (conceptual problems)				
<b>Cost</b>	Note the trouble caused by the condition (practical problems) or our inability to understand something more important (conceptual problems)				
<b>Solution, Main Point, or Claim</b>	Recommend a course of action to alleviate that troublesome condition (practical problems), or offer new knowledge, information, understanding (conceptual problems)				



Not every introduction follows that plan exactly. Preludes are relatively uncommon. In special circumstances, writers omit or rearrange other parts as well. Here are four common variations:

- When readers know a subject well, writers sometimes skip the shared context and open with the problem.
- When readers know a problem well, writers sometimes state the cost before the condition.
- When readers can be counted on to recognize the costs, writers sometimes skip them and just state the condition.
- When readers are willing to wait (which is rare), writers sometimes save their solution/main point/claim for the conclusion, ending the introduction with a promise that a solution will come.

Although many successful introductions use these variations, your best option is to follow the general pattern until you have lots of experience with it.

## Exercise 6.1

Once you know it, you will see this shared context-problem-solution pattern in all sorts of academic and professional writing. Start with three op-eds and do the following:

1. Find where the shared context ends and the statement of the problem begins.
2. Find the two parts of the problem: condition or situation and cost or consequence. Decide whether the problem is practical or conceptual.
3. Find the solution.

How are these three examples consistent? How do they vary?

## How to Revise: Introductions

To analyze, assess, and revise your introduction, do this:

1. **Determine whether you are posing a practical or conceptual problem.** Do you want readers to *do* something or to *think* something?
2. **Draw a line after your introduction.** If you cannot quickly locate the end of your introduction, neither will your readers, who might then miss both your problem and its solution, the main point of your paper.
3. **Divide the introduction into its three parts: shared context + problem + solution/main point/claim.** If you cannot quickly make those divisions, your introduction is likely to seem unfocused.
4. **Make sure the first word of the first sentence after the shared context is *but*, *however*, or some other word indicating that you will challenge that shared**

**context.** If you don't explicitly signal the contrast between the shared context and the problem, readers may miss it.

**5. Divide the problem into two parts: condition and cost.**

**5a. Is the condition the right kind for the problem?**

- For a practical problem, the condition must be something that exacts a palpable cost.
- For a conceptual problem, the condition must be something not known or understood. This should be stated not as a direct question, *Why do people try to recycle things they can't?*, but as a statement of what we do not know: *But we do not know why education campaigns aimed at reducing aspirational recycling have generally proven ineffective.*

**5b. Does the cost appropriately answer *So what?***

- For a practical problem, the answer to *So what?* must state some palpable consequence of the condition that causes unhappiness.
- For a conceptual problem, the answer to *So what?* must state some more significant issue that is not known or understood.

**6. Underline your solution/main point/claim.** This should appear at the end of the introduction in its stress position and should state the key themes that the rest of your paper will develop (more on that in Lesson 7).

## Framing Conclusions

A good introduction announces your key themes, motivates your readers, and states your main point, the solution to your motivating problem. Get your introduction straight, and readers can read the rest more quickly and understand it better.

A good conclusion serves a different end: as the last thing your reader reads, it should bring together your point, its significance, and its implications for thinking further about your problem. Conclusions vary more than introductions, but in a pinch, you can map the parts of your introduction onto your conclusion. Just reverse their order:

**1. Open your conclusion by stating (or restating) your point, the main claim of your paper, the solution to your problem:**

The problem of "aspirational recycling" can be effectively addressed through better education and, especially, labeling of recycling receptacles, so that it is clear in the moment exactly what can, and what can't, be recycled.

**2. Explain its significance by answering *So what?* Answer in a new way, if you can; if you can't, restate what you offered in the introduction, now as a benefit:**

Such measures would protect the environment not only by keeping recycled materials out of landfills but also by making them more valuable, further incentivizing investments in recycling.

**3. Suggest a further question or problem to be resolved, something still not known. Answer *Now what?*:**

Of course, recycling is not the only or even the best way to conserve: reducing consumption outright and reusing rather than disposing of materials whenever possible could have an even bigger impact, but they also demand more commitment. The challenge is to get the public to embrace these actions as they have already embraced recycling.

**4. End with an anecdote, quotation, or fact that echoes your prelude. We'll call this by another musical term, your *coda* (again, used most often in popular writing, rarely in the natural and social sciences):**

There are signs that our society is beginning to move in that direction. Online retailers are touting their minimalist packaging, and "right to repair" legislation, which would require manufacturers to make the tools and parts needed to repair their products available to third parties, has now been proposed in seventeen states. The reduce and repair movements are still in their infancies, but so was the recycling movement at that first Earth Day in 1970.

There are other ways to conclude, but this one works when nothing better comes to mind.

## Exercise 6.2 In Your Own Words

For this exercise, you can use pieces of writing that are finished or still in progress. In each, draw a line between the problem and the solution. Underline the condition and bracket the cost. Classify the problem as conceptual or practical. Then rewrite the conceptual problems as practical ones and the practical problems as conceptual ones. What did you have to change? Were some problems easier to rewrite in this way than others? Why?

## Exercise 6.3 In Your Own Words

Writers, especially in academic contexts, can struggle more with problem statements than with other parts of their introductions. It makes sense that writers would have this struggle. To state a problem, writers need to understand not only their own ideas but also the motives of their readers. This exercise will help you do that. For a project you are just beginning, do the following:

1. In a sentence, state your *topic*: In this paper I am writing about \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g., science in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, the space shuttle *Columbia* accident, sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea).
2. In a sentence, state why *you* selected this particular topic out of the many you could have chosen: I care about my topic because \_\_\_\_\_. (If you cannot complete this sentence, you need to do more thinking about your topic or choose another. You cannot expect your readers to care if you can't say why you do.)

3. In a sentence, state your *main point* or *claim*: The point I want to make about [topic] is that \_\_\_\_\_.
4. In a paragraph, describe one person (real or imagined) who would care deeply about your ideas. What does she (or he or they) look like? What does she do for a living? What are her personal interests? What books has she read in the past two months?
5. Now write a short letter to the person you have described, explaining to her why she should care about your paper.

You will probably find phrases and ideas in this letter that you can use in your problem statement.

## Exercise 6.4

Analyze introductions from three readings in your area of study or expertise using the procedure on pp. 94–95:

1. Determine whether the problem is practical or conceptual.
2. Draw a line at the introduction's end.
3. Divide the introduction into its three parts: shared context, problem, and solution/main point/claim. Do these three parts appear? Are they in the right order?
4. Circle the word or phrase (usually *but* or *however*) that indicates a challenge to the shared context.
5. Divide the problem into its two parts: condition and cost. Does the cost answer the question *So what?*
6. Underline the solution/main point/claim.

What patterns did you notice? How were these introductions similar to or different from those in the op-eds you examined in Exercise 6.1?

Now do the same with an introduction of your own.

## Summing Up

You best motivate readers with an introduction that states a problem readers want to see solved.

### Practical Problems

For a practical problem the key is to state its costs so clearly that readers will ask not *So what?* but *What do we do?* Here is a plan for introducing a practical problem.

**Shared Context:** Open the introduction with a brief statement of what you will go on to qualify or even contradict:

Recycling—the practice of separating from ordinary trash specific materials that can be made into new products—is today an expected and even habitual behavior: to toss an aluminium can in an ordinary trash bin is as unthinkable as it would be to toss it into the street or a neighbor's yard. shared context

**Problem-Condition:** Follow that with a statement noting something that needs changed. Introduce it with a *but, however, on the other hand*, etc. Imagine a *So what?* after it:

But many people, out of ignorance or enthusiasm, try to recycle things that aren't actually recyclable: plastic bags, paper coffee cups, Styrofoam, greasy pizza boxes, and more. condition *So what?*

**Problem-Cost:** Answer that imagined *So what?* with a statement of the consequences of that condition, its costs *to your readers* that they do not want to pay:

Such “aspirational recycling” has major environmental consequences. By making waste collected for recycling more difficult or even impossible to process, it can result in whole loads of waste intended for recycling going to the landfill instead. costs

**Solution, Main Point, or Claim:** Conclude with a statement proposing an *action* that will eliminate or at least ameliorate the costs:

We can address the causes of aspirational recycling through better education and better labeling of recycling bins. Thanks to the educational campaigns of the past, people know they should recycle. Now, we need to build on this success by creating more knowledgeable and discriminating recyclers. To this end, recycling bins should be labeled not just with the familiar triangle of arrows that is recycling's universal symbol, but with specific information about what kinds of things can—and can't—be recycled. Pilot programs in several municipalities show that this simple step can reduce aspirational recycling significantly. solution

## Conceptual Problems

For conceptual problems, the key is to state a small question worth answering because it helps to answer a larger, more significant one. Here is a plan for introducing conceptual problems:

**Shared Context:** Open the introduction with a brief statement of what you will go on to qualify or even contradict:

Recycling—the practice of separating from ordinary trash specific materials that can be made into new products—is today an expected and even habitual behavior. In fact, that habit is so engrained that many people, out of ignorance or enthusiasm, try to recycle things that aren't actually recyclable: plastic bags, paper coffee cups, Styrofoam, greasy pizza boxes, and more. shared context

**Problem-Condition:** Follow that with a statement of the condition of the problem. Introduce it with a *but, however, on the other hand*, etc. State something that is not known or well understood. Imagine a *So what?* after it:

But we don't know whether getting people to think about recycling, rather than just doing it out of habit, will lead them to stop recycling at all. condition/first, small question *So what?*

**Problem-Cost:** Answer that imagined *So what?* by noting a larger and more important issue that might be addressed if we know the answer to the first question:

If we knew that, we could design interventions that promise to curtail aspirational recycling without also discouraging recycling generally. cost/second, larger question

**Solution, Main Point, or Claim:** Conclude your introduction with a statement of the solution to the problem, an answer to the first question that helps answer the second one as well:

This study reports on our analysis of the efforts of three universities to address aspirational recycling among students through informational emails and better labeling of recycling receptacles. We found that while emails had negligible impact on student behavior, marking receptacles with detailed graphics showing the types of materials that can be recycled reduced aspirational recycling by almost thirty-five percent. solution

## Lesson 7

# Framing Sections

*One of the most difficult things is the first paragraph. I have spent many months on a first paragraph, and once I get it, the rest just comes out very easily. In the first paragraph you solve most of the problems with your book. The theme is defined, the style, the tone.*

—GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

The last lesson explained how to create an introduction that does two things:

- motivates your readers by stating a problem that they care about
- frames the rest of your document by stating the point and key concepts that you will develop in what follows

This lesson explains how that second point applies not just to your whole document but also to all of its parts: its main sections, subsections, even paragraphs. (We'll use the term *section* to mean any of these—that is, a part of a longer whole.)

Some writers think that by giving the point up front, they risk boring their readers. But that's often a mistake. When, as readers, we are unsure about the point after the introduction, we struggle more than we have to, even when we are reading about something familiar. We are grateful when writers help us grasp their ideas by stating them first and then elaborating.

When we read for pleasure, or when we're meant to follow the twists and turns of a writer's thinking or imagination, some uncertainty at the outset can be charming. For example, here are the first two stanzas of a poem by Emily Dickinson:

I like to see it lap the Miles—  
And lick the Valleys up—  
And stop to feed itself at Tanks—  
And then—prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains—  
And supercilious peer  
In Shanties—by the sides of Roads—  
And then a Quarry pare

Dickinson did not give this poem a title. It was only published after her death, under the title “The Railway Train.” (How far did you get before you figured out what the poem was about?) The addition of that title is a dubious improvement because it short-circuits the experience of reading the poem: we take pleasure in our dawning recognition of the poem’s topic.

But when we are reading less for pleasure than to understand something we need to know, that kind of initial uncertainty becomes a hurdle. What we look for on the page are signals that help us integrate what we are reading with the knowledge we already have, not in retrospect but as we read. Your readers will understand your writing better and more easily when you build those signals into it deliberately. This lesson explains how to do that.

## Forecasting Themes to Create Coherence

Like the term *clear*, the term *coherent* doesn’t refer to anything we find on the page. Coherence is an experience we create for ourselves as we make sense of what we read. In Lesson 4, we looked at those features of sentences that help readers create *local* coherence in short passages. But readers also need to see the *global* coherence of longer sections and whole documents. To help them, you can use a by-now-familiar principle: begin each section or subsection of a document with a short, easily grasped segment that states its point and introduces the themes that organize the longer segment that follows, the body. Then in that body, support, develop, or explain that point and those themes.

To help readers grasp the coherence of a document and its sections, follow these six principles:

### For the document:

1. Readers must know where the introduction ends and the body begins, as well as where each section ends and the next begins. Identify the start of each new section with a heading that includes the key themes for that section (see 5 below). If your field does not use headings, delete them for the final draft.
2. At the end of the introduction, readers look for the document’s main point, claim, or solution, which should state the main themes developed in the rest. If you have good reason to save your main point for the conclusion, end your introduction with a sentence that promises the point to come *and* states the main themes.
3. In the body, readers look for the concepts announced as themes at the end of the introduction, using them to organize their understanding of the whole. Be sure that you repeat those themes regularly.



**For each section:**

4. Readers look for a short segment that introduces the section or subsection.
5. At the end of that introductory segment, readers look for a sentence that states both the point of the section and the specific concepts you will develop as distinctive themes for that section.
6. In the body of the section, readers look for the concepts announced as themes at the end of the introductory segment, using them to organize their understanding of that section. Be sure that you repeat them regularly.

## Quick Tip

You can use these six principles to prepare yourself to read a difficult document. First, highlight the question in the problem statement and the main claim that answers it (see pp. 88–92). Next, for each section, highlight its introduction, point, and key concepts. If you don't find them in the introduction to a section, look for them at the end of the section. Finally, read through just the parts that you highlighted. When you then begin reading in detail, you will have in mind an overview that will help you better understand and remember the rest.

In the limited space we have here, we can't illustrate these principles with entire documents or even long sections. So we'll use paragraphs and ask you to relate their structure to that of a whole section of a document.

For example, read this:

**1a.** In this study, we analyze essays by thirty sixth-grade students to determine how well eight weeks of instruction could teach them to distinguish fact from opinion. Because that ability is an important aspect of making sound arguments of any kind, it was a main focus of the instruction students received throughout the study. In an essay written before instruction began, the students failed almost completely to distinguish fact from opinion. In an essay written after four weeks of instruction, the students visibly attempted to distinguish fact from opinion but did so inconsistently. In three more essays, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently but never achieved the predicted level of performance. In a final essay written six months after instruction ended, they did no better than they did in their pre-instruction essays. We thus conclude that short-term training to distinguish fact from opinion has no consistent or long-term effect.

The first sentence announces the topic, and the second gives some useful information. But we don't see in them the key concepts that follow: *inconsistently*, *never achieved*, *no better than*. Those terms are essential to the point of the whole passage. Worse, the passage doesn't give us that point until the very end: the training

had no long-term effect. So as we read, the passage seems to ramble—until the end, when we finally learn what we need to know to make sense of it retrospectively. But that takes more effort than we should have to expend.

Compare this version. Only one sentence (boldfaced) has been changed, but that change makes a real difference:

**1b.** In this study, we analyze essays by thirty sixth-grade students to determine how well eight weeks of instruction could teach them to distinguish fact from opinion. **They did so successfully during the instruction period, but the effect was inconsistent and less than predicted, and six months after instruction ended, the instruction had no measurable impact.** In an essay written before instruction began, the students failed almost completely to distinguish fact from opinion. In an essay written after four weeks of instruction, the students visibly attempted to distinguish fact from opinion but did so inconsistently. In three more essays, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently but never achieved the predicted level of performance. In a final essay written six months after instruction ended, they did no better than they did in their pre-instruction essays. We thus conclude that short-term training to distinguish fact from opinion has no consistent or long-term effect.

That second sentence in **1b** does two things the one in **1a** did not. First, it states the point of the whole passage, and for that reason we'll call it the passage's *point sentence*. Second, it signals the passage's key terms (boldfaced) to let us know how to focus our attention as we read:

**1b.** They did so successfully during the instruction period, but the effect was **inconsistent** and **less than predicted**, and six months after instruction ended, the instruction had **no measurable impact**.

Because that sentence lets us know *in advance* what's coming, we feel that the passage is coherent, and we read it with more understanding.

Now imagine two versions of a document. In one, the point of each section and of the whole appears at its *end* (as in **1a**), and what openings there are do not introduce the key terms that follow. In the other, each point appears in an opening, introductory segment to a paragraph, a section, or the whole document (as in **1b**). Which of these versions would be easier to read and understand? The second, of course.

Keep in mind this principle: put the point sentence at the end of the short opening segment; make it the *last* sentence your readers encounter before starting the longer and more complex segment that follows.

- In a paragraph, the opening segment might be just a single sentence, so by default, it will be the last sentence readers read before they read what follows. So if a paragraph has a *two-sentence* introduction (as did **1b**), be sure that its point is the second sentence, still making it the last thing readers read before they read the rest.

- For sections, your introductory opening segment might be a paragraph or more. For a whole document, you might need several paragraphs. Even in those cases, put your point sentence at the end of that opening segment, no matter how long it is. Again, be sure it's the last thing readers read before they begin the longer, more complex segment that follow.

As we noted in Lesson 6, some writers think that if they reveal their main point in their introduction, readers will be bored and not read on. Not true. If you motivate readers with an interesting problem, they will want to see how you address it.

## Here's the Point

To write a document that readers will find coherent, begin every section (including paragraphs and subsections) with a short, easily understandable, opening segment. At the end of that opening segment, put a sentence that states both the point of the section and the key concepts that follow. Such *point sentences* constitute the outline or “skeleton” of your document, its logical structure. If readers miss them, they may judge your writing to be incoherent.

## Exercise 7.1

Test this advice on a section of writing from a published source. First, note your impression of the section: How tightly does it seem to hang together? How easily can you grasp its point? Then, apply our advice: Does it have a clearly defined opening segment? If so, mark where that segment ends on the page. Does that opening segment state the section's point? If so, underline it. If not, figure out where that point is stated and underline it there. Does it forecast the section's key themes? If so, circle those words. If not, identify the key themes in the body and circle those words there. Finally, rewrite the section. If you found it hard to understand, apply our advice to make it more accessible. If you felt the section was easy to understand, make it more difficult by applying our advice in reverse.

## Relevance and Organization

We can make sense of almost anything we read if we know its points. But to make full sense of a passage, we must see two more things.

1. **Readers must see how everything in a section is *relevant* to its point.** Consider this passage:

In this study, we analyze essays written by thirty sixth-grade students to determine the effectiveness of training in distinguishing fact from opinion. In an essay written before training, the students failed almost completely to distinguish fact and opinion.

These essays were also badly organized in several ways. In the first two essays after training began, the students visibly attempted to distinguish fact from opinion but did so inconsistently. They also produced fewer spelling and punctuation errors. In essays four through seven, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently, but in their final essay, written six months after completion of instruction, they did no better than they did in their first essay. Their last essay was significantly longer than their first one, however. Their training thus had some effect on their writing during the training period, but it was inconsistent and transient.

What are those sentences about spelling, organization, and length doing there? When readers can't see how individual sentences are relevant to a section's overall point, they are likely to find what they read incoherent.

There is no simple rule for determining relevance, but here are its most important kinds. Sentences are relevant to a point when they offer these:

- background or context
- points of sections and the whole
- reasons supporting a point
- evidence, facts, or data supporting a reason
- an explanation of reasoning or methods
- consideration of other points of view

**2. Readers must see how the parts of your document are organized.** Readers want to see not just how everything they read is relevant to a point but also what principle is behind the organization of your document's parts. Readers look for three kinds of order: *chronological*, *coordinate*, and *logical*.

- **Chronological** This is the simplest order, from earlier to later (or vice versa), as a narrative or as cause and effect. Signal time with *first*, *then*, *finally*, ...; signal cause and effect with *as a result*, *because of that*, and so on. That passage about the research on students' essays was chronologically organized.
- **Coordinate** Two or more sections are coordinate when they are like pillars equally supporting a common roof. *There are three reasons why* ... Order those sections so that their sequence makes sense to your reader—by importance, complexity, and so on—then signal that order with words and phrases such as *first*, *second*, ... or *also*, *another*, *more important*, *in addition*, and so on. That's how this section on order is organized.
- **Logical** This is the most complex order: by example and generalization (or vice versa), premise and conclusion (or vice versa), or by assertion and contradiction. Signal logic with *for example*, *on the other hand*, *it follows that* ...

## Quick Tip

Writers often order their documents chronologically because that is easiest for them. Once you have drafted a paper, read it through to see whether you have organized it simply as a narrative of your thinking. If you have, consider revising. Order your ideas not in the way that is easiest for you, but in the way that best helps your readers understand them.

## On Paragraphs

In different kinds of writing, paragraphs follow different conventions. In newspaper articles, they are often only a sentence long. In this book, they are a bit longer. In academic papers and scholarly journal articles, they can run half a page or more. Here is some advice that will help you write coherent longer paragraphs:

- Begin with one or two short, easily grasped sentences that frame what follows.
- State the point of the paragraph (in traditional terms its *topic sentence*) in the last sentence of its introductory opening segment. If this is just one sentence, it will be its point by default.
- Toward the end of that point sentence, name the key themes that thread through the rest of the paragraph.

Treat this advice as general guidance, not as a rigid template. Many longer paragraphs don't follow this tidy structure, and we get through them just fine. But even when the first few sentences of a paragraph don't state its point, they still usually introduce its key themes. If the point doesn't appear at the beginning of a paragraph, it will usually come at the end.

Compare these two examples:

**2a.** The team obtained exact sequences of fossils—new lines of antelopes, giraffes, and elephants developing out of old and appearing in younger strata, then dying out as they were replaced by others in still later strata. The most specific sequences they reconstructed were several lines of pigs that had been common at the site and had developed rapidly. The team produced family trees that dated types of pigs so accurately that when they found pigs next to fossils of questionable age, they could use the pigs to date the fossils. By mapping every fossil precisely, the team was able to recreate exactly how and when the animals in a whole ecosystem evolved.

**2b.** By precisely mapping every fossil they found, the team was able to recreate exactly how and when the animals in a whole ecosystem evolved. They charted new lines of antelopes, giraffes, and elephants developing out of old and appearing in younger strata, then dying out as they were replaced by others in still later strata.

The most exact sequences they reconstructed were several lines of pigs that had been common at the site and had developed rapidly. The team produced family trees that dated types of pigs so accurately that when they found pigs next to fossils of questionable age, they could use the pigs to date the fossils.

Paragraph **2a** makes its point in the last sentence, paragraph **2b** in its first sentence. Reading these paragraphs in isolation, you probably found **2b** slightly easier to understand. But in the context of an otherwise coherent text about fossil hunters and their work, **2a** probably wouldn't give you any trouble.

If you have framed and organized your document and its sections well, your readers will be able to make their way through a few paragraphs that are less than perfect. But if they don't know what your paragraphs are supposed to add up to, then no matter how well written they are individually, your readers may well feel lost.

## A General Principle of Clarity and Coherence

This general principle implies many of our others. It applies to individual sentences, to longer paragraphs, to sections and subsections, and to whole documents:

Readers are more likely to feel that a unit of writing of any length is clear and coherent if it opens with a short, easily understandable segment that frames the longer and more complex segment that follows.

**Sentences:** In a simple sentence, that opening segment is a subject/topic. Compare these two:

**1a.** Resistance in Nevada against its use as a waste disposal site has been heated.

✓ **1b.** Nevada has heatedly resisted its use as a waste disposal site.

In a complex sentence, that opening segment is a clause that expresses the point of its sentence. Compare these two:

**2a.** Greater knowledge of pre-Columbian civilizations and the effect of European colonization destroying their societies by inflicting on them devastating diseases has led to a historical reassessment of Columbus's role in world history.

✓ **2b.** Historians are reassessing Columbus's role in world history because they know more about pre-Columbian civilizations and how European colonization destroyed their societies by inflicting on them devastating diseases.

In **2a**, the point of the sentence is buried at its end. In **2b**, the sentence's opening clause states the main point, its most important claim: *Historians are reassessing Columbus's role in world history*. That claim is then supported by the longer and more complex clause that follows.

**Paragraphs:** In a paragraph, that opening segment is an introductory sentence or two that both expresses the point of the paragraph and introduces its key concepts. Look again at those paragraphs on the study of students' essays.

**3a.** In this study, we analyze essays by thirty sixth-grade students to determine how well eight weeks of instruction could teach them to distinguish fact from opinion. Because that ability is an important aspect of making sound arguments of any kind, it was a main focus of the instruction students received throughout the study. In an essay written before instruction began, the students failed almost completely to distinguish fact from opinion. In an essay written after four weeks of instruction, the students visibly attempted to distinguish fact from opinion but did so inconsistently. In three more essays, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently but never achieved the predicted level of performance. In a final essay written six months after instruction ended, they did no better than they did in their pre-instruction essays. We thus conclude that short-term training to distinguish fact from opinion has no consistent or long-term effect.

✓ **3b.** In this study, we analyze essays by thirty sixth-grade students to determine how well eight weeks of instruction could teach them to distinguish fact from opinion. They did so successfully during the instruction period, but the effect was inconsistent and less than predicted, and six months after instruction ended, the instruction had no measurable impact. <sup>opening segment/point</sup> In an essay written before instruction began, the students failed almost completely to distinguish fact from opinion. In an essay written after four weeks of instruction, the students visibly attempted to distinguish fact from opinion but did so inconsistently. In three more essays, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently but never achieved the predicted level of performance. In a final essay written six months after instruction ended, they did no better than they did in their pre-instruction essays. We thus conclude that short-term training to distinguish fact from opinion has no consistent or long-term effect.

The first version of this paragraph has no clearly distinguished opening segment and does not announce its key themes at the outset. The second version has a clearly marked opening segment that states the point, and it clearly announces the key themes of the paragraph.

**Sections:** In a section or subsection, that opening segment may be just a paragraph; in longer sections, it will be proportionally longer. Even so, at its end it expresses the section's point and introduces the key concepts that follow. There is not enough space here to illustrate how that principle applies to a passage several paragraphs long, but it is easy to imagine.

**Whole documents:** In a whole document, that opening segment is typically called the introduction, and it may be one or more paragraphs long, perhaps even a few pages. Even so, it should be substantially shorter than the rest, and in a sentence at its end, it should state the point of the whole document and introduce its key concepts.

## Quick Tip

Budget your time for both drafting and revising so that you spend most of it on beginnings: the introduction to the whole, then the opening segments of major sections, then the opening segments of subsections and paragraphs, and finally the first words of sentences. Get those beginnings straight, and the rest is likely to take care of itself.

## The Costs and Benefits of Templated Writing

Some writers fear that patterns like these will inhibit their creativity. That's a reasonable concern if you are writing a literary essay that explores your own thoughts as you have them, for readers who have the time and patience to follow the unfolding of your thinking. If you are writing that kind of essay for that kind of reader, go to it. Don't tie yourself to what we've said here.

On most occasions, however, most of us read less for sheer pleasure than to understand what we need to know. You help readers toward this end when you follow the principles of clarity and coherence we've looked at in Parts Two and Three of this book.

Such writing may seem formulaic—to *you*, because you will be so conscious of the patterns you followed. But it earns the gratitude of readers who have too little time to read, understand, and remember everything they must and who will, in any event, focus more on understanding the substance of your writing than on critiquing its form.

## Exercise 7.2 In Your Own Words

A basic principle of clarity is that any section of writing—a sentence, a paragraph, a section, a whole document—should begin with a short segment that introduces and frames the longer and more complex segment that follows. Go through a piece of your writing section by section. Draw a line after that short segment and circle words in that segment that signal key themes in what follows. If you cannot, revise.

## Exercise 7.3 In Your Own Words

To feel a document or a section of one is coherent, a reader needs to understand how it is organized (review pp. 104–106). But writers, especially in early drafts, often organize their documents in the way that is easiest for them, not the way that is best for their readers. In particular, writers often adopt a chronological or narrative structure by default. You can see why this is so. When getting your ideas down on paper, it is easiest simply to rehearse your thinking or research. But most often, readers want not just to hear a story of discovery but to understand your points. Revising for global coherence,



therefore, often involves translating a document from a chronological or narrative structure to a coordinate or logical one. A reader can help you do this.

Go through a document or section that you have organized chronologically. Highlight your points, paragraph by paragraph, and copy them onto index cards. Shuffle the cards and give them to a reader. Have a reader put the cards into what seems like their right order. Reorganize your document or section so that it follows that order. What did you have to change?

## Summing Up

Plan your paragraphs, sections, and whole document on this model:

- Open each unit (paragraph, section, or whole) with a relatively short segment introducing it.
- End that segment with a sentence stating the point of that unit.
- Toward the end of that point sentence, use terms that name key themes the rest of the unit develops (boldfaced, italicized, and capitalized).

Researchers have made strides in the **early and accurate diagnosis** of *Alzheimer's*, [but those **diagnoses** have raised A NEW HUMAN PROBLEM about **informing those at risk** before they show any *symptoms of it*.<sub>point</sub>]

- In the longer segment that follows, use consistent topics (underlined).
- Repeat key terms introduced toward the end of the opening segment (boldfaced, italicized, and capitalized).
- Make every sentence follow the old-new principle.
- Order sentences, paragraphs, and sections in a way that readers understand.
- Make all sentences relevant to the point of the larger unit that they constitute.

Not too long ago, when physicians examined an older patient who seemed *out of touch with reality*, they had to **guess** whether that person had *Alzheimer's* or was *only senile*. In the past few years, however, they have been able to use **new and more reliable tests** focusing on genetic clues. But in the accuracy of these new tests lies the risk of ANOTHER KIND OF HUMAN TRAGEDY: 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.

## PART FOUR

---

# Grace

*In literature the ambition of the novice is to acquire the literary  
language; the struggle of the adept is to get rid of it.*

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

# Lesson 8

## Concision

*The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.*

—HANS HOFMANN

You write more clearly when you match your characters and actions with your subjects and verbs, when you get the right characters into topics and the right words under stress, when you motivate readers with well-crafted introductions, and when you frame your paragraphs, sections, and documents to help readers grasp their global coherence. But readers may still think your prose a long way from graceful if it's anything like this:

| In my personal opinion, it is necessary that we should not ignore the opportunity to think over each and every suggestion offered.

That sentence matches characters with subjects and actions with verbs but in too many words: *opinion* is always personal, so we don't need *personal*, and since this statement is opinion, we don't need *in my opinion*. *Think over* and *not ignore* both mean *consider*. *Each and every* is redundant. And *suggestion* is by definition *offered*. In fewer words:

| ✓ We should consider each suggestion.

Though not yet shapely or elegant, that sentence at least has the virtue of compactness or, as we'll call it, concision.

### How to Revise: Concision

Readers think you write concisely when you use just the words you need to say what you mean. Here are six principles that help you do that:

1. Delete words that mean little or nothing.
2. Delete words that repeat the meaning of other words.
3. Delete words implied by other words.
4. Replace a phrase with a word.

5. Change negatives to affirmatives.
6. Delete useless adjectives and adverbs.

Here they are again, in detail:

1. **Delete meaningless words.** Some words are just verbal tics that we use unconsciously:

kind of	actually	particular	really	certain	various
virtually	individual	basically	generally	given	practically

Productivity **actually** depends on **certain** factors that **basically** involve psychology more than **any particular** technology.

- ✓ Productivity depends on psychology more than on technology.

2. **Delete doubled words.** Early in the history of English, writers got into the habit of pairing a French or Latin word with a native English one because foreign words sounded more learned. Most paired words today are just redundant. Among the common ones:

full and complete	hope and trust	any and all
true and accurate	each and every	basic and fundamental
hope and desire	first and foremost	various and sundry

3. **Delete what readers can infer.** This redundancy is common but hard to identify because it comes in so many forms.

**Redundant Modifiers** Words often imply others, especially their modifiers (boldfaced):

Do not try to *predict* **future** events that **will completely** *revolutionize* society, because **past history** shows that it is the **final outcome** of minor events that **unexpectedly** *surprises* us more.

- ✓ Do not try to predict revolutionary events, because history shows that the outcome of minor events surprises us more.

Some common redundancies:

terrible tragedy	various different	free gift
basic fundamentals	future plans	each individual
final outcome	true facts	consensus of opinion

**Redundant Categories** All words imply their general categories, so you can usually cut extra words that name them (boldfaced):

During that *period* **of time**, the *deck* **area** became *gray* **in color** and *dull* **in appearance**.

- ✓ During that *period*, the *deck* became *gray* and *dull*.

To do that, you may have to change an adjective into an adverb:

The holes must be aligned in an *accurate* **manner**.

- ✓ The holes must be aligned *accurately*.

Sometimes you can change an adjective into a noun to eliminate a more general noun:

The county manages the *educational* **system** and *public recreational* **activities**.

- ✓ The county manages *education* and *public recreation*.

Here are some general nouns (boldfaced) often used redundantly:

large in <b>size</b>	round in <b>shape</b>	honest in <b>character</b>
unusual in <b>nature</b>	of a strange <b>type</b>	<b>area</b> of mathematics
of a bright <b>color</b>	at an early <b>time</b>	in a confused <b>state</b>

**General Implications** This kind of wordiness is even harder to spot because it can be so diffuse:

Imagine trying to learn the rules for playing the game of chess.

*Learn* implies *trying*, *rules* implies *playing the game*, *chess* is a *game*. So more concisely,

- ✓ Imagine learning the rules of chess.

#### 4. Replace a phrase with a word.

To fix this redundancy, you need a big vocabulary and the wit to use it. For example:

As you carefully go over what you have written to improve wording and catch errors of spelling and punctuation, the thing to do before anything else is to see whether you could use sequences of subjects and verbs instead of the same ideas expressed in nouns.

That is,

- ✓ As you edit, first replace nominalizations with clauses.

Here, we compressed five phrases into five words:

carefully go over what you have written to improve wording and catch errors of spelling and punctuation	→ edit
the thing to do before anything else	→ first
use X instead of Y	→ replace
sequences of subjects and verbs	→ clauses
the same ideas expressed in nouns	→ nominalizations

We can't tell you when to replace a phrase with a word, much less give you the word. We can only point out that you should be alert for opportunities to do so, which is to say, try.

Here are some common phrases (boldfaced) to watch for. Note that some of these let you turn a nominalization into a verb (both italicized):

We must explain **the reason for** the *delay* in the meeting.

- ✓ We must explain **why** the meeting is *delayed*.

**Despite the fact that** the data were checked, errors occurred.

- ✓ **Even though** the data were checked, errors occurred.

**In the event that** you finish early, contact this office.

- ✓ **If** you finish early, contact this office.

**In a situation where** a class closes, you may petition to get in.

- ✓ **When** a class closes, you may petition to get in.

I want to say a few words **concerning the matter of** money.

- ✓ I want to say a few words **about** money.

**There is a need for** more careful *inspection* of all welds.

- ✓ You **must** *inspect* all welds more carefully.

We **are in a position to** make you an offer.

- ✓ We **can** make you an offer.

**It is possible that** nothing will come of this.

- ✓ Nothing **may** come of this.

**Prior to** the *end* of the training, apply for your license.

- ✓ **Before** training *ends*, apply for your license.

We have noted a **decrease/increase in the number of** errors.

- ✓ We have noted **fewer/more** errors.

**5. Change negatives to affirmatives.** When you express an idea in a negative form, you not only use an extra word (*same* → *not different*), you also force readers to do a kind of algebraic calculation. These two sentences mean much the same thing, but the affirmative is more direct:

- ✓ Do not write in the negative. → Write in the affirmative.

You can rewrite most negatives:

not careful	→	careless	not many	→	few
not the same	→	different	not often	→	rarely
not allow	→	prevent	not stop	→	continue
not notice	→	overlook	not include	→	omit

Do not translate a negative into an affirmative if you want to emphasize the negative. (Is that such a sentence? We could have written, *Keep a negative sentence when . . .*)

Some verbs, prepositions, and conjunctions are implicitly negative:

<b>Verbs</b>	preclude, prevent, lack, fail, doubt, reject, avoid, deny, refuse, exclude, contradict, prohibit, bar
<b>Prepositions</b>	without, against, lacking, but for, except
<b>Conjunctions</b>	unless, except when

You can baffle readers if you combine *not* with these negative words. Compare these:

Benefits will **not** be **denied except when** you have **failed** to submit applications **without** documentation.

- ✓ You will receive benefits only if you submit your documents.
- ✓ To receive benefits, submit your documents.

And you baffle readers completely when you combine negative words with passive verbs and nominalizations:

There should be **no** SUBMISSION of payments **without** NOTIFICATION of this office, **unless** the PAYMENT does **not** exceed \$100.

To revise, first replace the nominalizations with verbs:

Do not **submit** payments if you have not **notified** this office, unless you are **paying** less than \$100.

Then change the negatives into affirmatives:

- ✓ If you pay more than \$100, notify this office first.

**6. Delete adjectives and adverbs.** Many writers can't resist adding useless adjectives and adverbs. Try deleting every adverb and every adjective before a noun, and then restore *only* those that readers need to understand the passage. In this passage, which ones should be restored?

At the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as ~~absolute and irreconcilable~~ principles ~~continually~~ at war. To move beyond this ~~static and limiting~~ view, we can remember the ~~Chinese~~ approach to yin and yang. They are two principles, yes, but they are conceived not as ~~irreconcilable polar~~ opposites but as elements that coexist and should be brought into balance ~~as much as possible~~. As sociolinguist Suzanne Wong Scollon notes, "Yin is always present in and changing into yang and vice versa." How can we translate this ~~abstract~~ idea into ~~daily~~ practice?

—Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*

## Exercise 8.1

Prune the redundancy from these sentences.

1. Critics cannot avoid employing complex and abstract technical terms if they are to successfully analyze literary texts and discuss them in a meaningful way.
2. Scientific research generally depends on fully accurate data if it is to offer theories that will allow us to predict the future in a plausible way.
3. Most likely, a majority of all patients who appear at a public medical clinical facility do not expect special medical attention or treatment, because their particular health problems and concerns are often not major and for the most part can usually be adequately treated without much time, effort, and attention.
4. Notwithstanding the fact that all legal restrictions on the use of firearms are the subject of heated debate and argument, it is necessary that the general public not stop carrying on discussions pro and con in regard to them.

Where appropriate, change the following negatives to affirmatives, and do any more editing you think useful.

5. There is no possibility in regard to a reduction in the size of the federal deficit if reductions in federal spending are not introduced.
6. Do not discontinue medication unless symptoms of dizziness and nausea are not present for six hours.
7. So long as taxpayers do not engage in a widespread refusal to pay their taxes, the government will have no difficulty not defaulting on its debts.
8. If we do not want to find ourselves unprepared for the future, public education cannot continue to go unsupported.

## Exercise 8.2

Here are sentences from two “free” offers.

You will not be charged your first monthly fee unless you don’t cancel within the first thirty days.

To avoid being charged your first monthly fee, cancel your membership within the first thirty days.

Which is less clear? Why might it have been written like that?



## Redundant Metadiscourse

Lesson 3 described metadiscourse as language that refers to the following:

- the writer's intentions: *to sum up, candidly, I believe*
- directions to the reader: *note that, consider now, as you see*
- the structure of the text: *first, finally, in this section*

Almost everything you write needs some metadiscourse, but too much buries your ideas:

The last point I would like to make is that in regard to the work habits of millennials, it is important to keep in mind that they are characterized by their expectation of collaboration.

Only eight of those thirty-four words address the work habits of millennials:

work habits of millennials ... characterized ... expectation of collaboration.

Most of the rest is metadiscourse. When we prune it, we tighten the sentence:

The work habits of millennials are characterized by their expectation of collaboration.

Now that we see what the sentence says, we can make it still more direct:

✓ Millennials expect to collaborate when they work.

How writers use metadiscourse varies by field, but you can usually cut these two types:

**1. Metadiscourse That Attributes Your Ideas to a Source** Don't announce that something has been *observed, noticed, noted*, and so on. Just state the fact:

High divorce rates **have been observed** to occur in areas that **have been determined to have** low population density.

✓ High divorce rates occur in areas with low population density.

**2. Metadiscourse That Announces Your Topic** The boldfaced phrases tell your reader that you are about to state what your sentence is "about":

**This section introduces another** problem, that of noise pollution. **The first thing to say about it is** that noise pollution exists not only ...

Readers catch the topic more easily if you reduce the metadiscourse:

**Another** problem is noise pollution. **First**, it exists not only ...

## Hedges and Intensifiers

Another kind of metadiscourse reflects the writer's certainty about what she is claiming. *Hedges* qualify your certainty; *intensifiers* increase it. Both can be redundant when used excessively. But they can also be useful because they signal how

well you balance caution and confidence and therefore influence how readers judge your character.

## Hedges

These are common hedges:

<b>Adverbs</b>	usually, often, sometimes, almost, virtually, possibly, allegedly, arguably, perhaps, apparently, in some ways, to a certain extent, somewhat, in some/certain respects
<b>Adjectives</b>	most, many, some, a certain number of
<b>Verbs</b>	may, might, can, could, seem, tend, appear, suggest, indicate

Too much hedging sounds mealy-mouthed, like this:

There **seems to be some** evidence to **suggest** that **certain** differences between Japanese and Western rhetoric **could** derive from historical influences **possibly** traceable to **what might be called** Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

On the other hand, only a fool or someone with massive historical evidence would make an assertion as flatly certain as this:

This evidence **proves** that Japanese and Western rhetorics differ because of Japan's cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

In most academic writing, we more often state claims closer to this (note our own hedging):

- ✓ This evidence **suggests** that **aspects** of Japanese and Western rhetoric differ because of Japan's **relative** cultural isolation and Europe's history of cross-cultural contacts.

The verbs *indicate* and *suggest* let you state a claim about which you are less than 100-percent certain but confident enough to propose:

- ✓ The evidence **indicates** that some of these questions remain unresolved.
- ✓ These data **suggest** that further studies are necessary.

Even confident scientists hedge. This next paragraph introduced the most significant breakthrough in the history of genetics, the discovery of the double helix of DNA. If anyone was entitled to be assertive, it was Crick and Watson. But they chose to be diffident (note, too, the first person *we*; hedges are boldfaced):

We **wish to suggest a** [not *the*] structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) ... A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey ... **In our opinion**, this structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) **We believe** that the material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid ... (2) **Some** of the van der Waals distances **appear** to be too small.

—J. D. Watson and F. H. C. Crick, "Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids"

## Intensifiers

These are common intensifiers:

<b>Adverbs</b>	very, pretty, quite, rather, clearly, obviously, undoubtedly, certainly, of course, indeed, inevitably, invariably, always, literally
<b>Adjectives</b>	key, central, crucial, basic, fundamental, major, principal, clear, core, essential
<b>Verbs</b>	show, prove, establish, as you/we/everyone knows/can see, it is clear/obvious that

The most common intensifier, however, is the absence of a hedge. Without the hedges, Crick and Watson's claim would be more concise but more aggressive. Compare this revision. Words that are stronger than Crick and Watson's are boldfaced, but most of the aggressive tone comes from the *absence* of hedges:

We wish to ~~suggest~~ **state here** a ~~the~~ structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.) ... A structure for nucleic acid has already been proposed by Pauling and Corey ... ~~In our opinion,~~ [T]his structure is unsatisfactory for two reasons: (1) ~~We believe that~~ [T]he material which gives the X-ray diagrams is the salt, not the free acid ... (2) ~~Some of~~ [T]he van der Waals distances ~~appear to be~~ **are** too small.

Confident writers use intensifiers less often than they use hedges because they want to avoid sounding as assertive as this:

For a century now, **all** liberals have argued against **any** censorship of art, and **every** court has found their arguments so **completely** persuasive that **not** a person **any** longer remembers how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **totally** a thing of the past.

Some writers think that kind of aggressive style is persuasive. Quite the opposite. If you state a claim moderately, readers are more likely to consider it thoughtfully:

For **about** a century now, **many** liberals have argued against censorship of art, and **most** courts have found their arguments persuasive **enough** that **few** people remember **exactly** how they were countered. As a result, today, censorship is **virtually** a thing of the past.

## Quick Tip

When most readers read a sentence that begins with something like *obviously*, *undoubtedly*, *it is clear that*, *there is no question that*, and so on, they reflexively think the opposite.

## Exercise 8.3

Edit these for unnecessary metadiscourse and redundancy.

1. But, on the other hand, we can perhaps point out that there may always be TV programming to appeal to our most prurient and, therefore, lowest interests.
2. In this particular section, I intend to discuss my position about the possible need to dispense with the standard approach to plea bargaining. I believe this for two reasons. The first reason is that there is the possibility of letting hardened criminals avoid receiving their just punishment. The second reason is the following: plea bargaining seems to encourage a growing lack of respect for the judicial system.
3. Depending on the particular position that one takes on this question, the educational system has taken on a degree of importance that may be equal to or perhaps even exceed the family as a major source of transmission of social values.
4. It is my belief that in regard to terrestrial-type snakes, an assumption can be made that there are probably none in unmapped areas of the world surpassing the size of those we already have knowledge of.

## Concise, Not Terse

Having stressed concision so strongly, we must now step back. Readers don't like flab, but neither do they like a style so terse that it's all gristle and bone. Here is some amiable advice from the most widely read book on style, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*:

Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try. Quite often you will discover, on examining the completed work, that there are serious flaws in the arrangement of the material, calling for transpositions. When this is the case, a word processor can save you time and labor as you rearrange the manuscript. You can select material on the screen and move it to a more appropriate spot, or, if you cannot find the right spot, you can move the material to the end of the manuscript until you decide whether to delete it. Some writers find that working with a printed copy of the manuscript helps them to visualize the process of change; others prefer to revise entirely on screen. Above all, do not be afraid to experiment with what you have written. Save both the original and the revised versions; you can always use the computer to restore the manuscript to its original condition, should that course seem best. Remember, it is no sign of weakness or defeat that your manuscript ends up in need of major surgery. This is a common occurrence in all writing, and among the best writers. (205 words)

We can shorten that paragraph just by erasing its redundancy:

Revising is part of writing. Few writers ~~are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try. Quite~~ Often you will discover ~~on examining the completed work, that there are serious~~ flaws in the arrangement of the material. ~~calling for transpositions.~~ When this is the case, a word processor can save you time and labor as you rearrange the manuscript. You can ~~select material on the screen and~~ move [material] to a more appropriate spot, or, if you cannot find the right spot, you can move the material to the end of the manuscript until you decide whether to delete it. Some writers find that working with a printed ~~copy of the~~ manuscript helps them to visualize the process of change; others prefer to revise ~~entirely~~ on screen. Above all, ~~do not be afraid to~~ experiment ~~with what you have written.~~ Save both the original and the revised versions; you can always ~~use the computer to~~ restore the manuscript to its original condition, ~~should that course seem best.~~ Remember, It is no sign of weakness or defeat that your manuscript ~~ends up in need[s] of~~ major surgery. This is a common ~~occurrence~~ in all writing, and among the best writers. (149 words)

With some rewording, we can cut that version by another third (revisions are italicized):

Revising is part of writing, *because* few writers ~~produce what they are after on the first try~~ *write perfect first drafts.* *If you use a word processor and find* Often you will discover flaws in *your* arrangement, ~~of the material.~~ When this is the case, a word processor can save you time and labor as you rearrange the manuscript. you can move material to a more appropriate spot, or, if you cannot find *one, the right spot,* you can move the material to the end of the manuscript until you decide whether to delete it. Some writers find ~~that working with~~ a printed manuscript helps them to visualize ~~the process of~~ change; others prefer to revise on screen. Above all, experiment. Save ~~both the original and the revised~~ version; you can always *go back to it* ~~restore the manuscript to its original condition.~~ It is no sign of weakness ~~or defeat~~ that your manuscript needs surgery. This is common in all writing, and among the best writers. (99 words)

And if we cut to the bone, we can reduce that in half:

Most writers revise because few write a perfect first draft. If you work on a computer, you can rearrange the parts by moving them around. If you save the original, you can always go back to it. Even great writers revise, so if your manuscript needs surgery, it signals no weakness. (51 words)

But in reducing that paragraph to a quarter of its original length, we've also stripped away its garrulous charm, a tradeoff that many readers would reject.

How can you tell you when you've written so concisely that your writing seems terse, even abrupt? The best way is to listen to your readers, for they experience your writing as you yourself never can.

## Exercise 8.4 In Your Own Words

Revise a passage from a published source, using as a model our revision of the passage from Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* (pp. 121–122). Pick a long paragraph or section (about 200 words). Now, shorten it to about 150 words, 100 words, 50 words. What does that passage gain or lose with each of these revisions? Now do the same with a passage from your own writing.

## Exercise 8.5 In Your Own Words

Every piece of writing needs some metadiscourse, but too much buries your ideas. Have a reader go through several pages of your writing and highlight all the metadiscourse. With your reader, address the following questions: Which instances of metadiscourse are useful, and which are unnecessary? Are there places without metadiscourse where some would be helpful? Revise as necessary.

## Summing Up

You need more than concision to guarantee grace, but when you clear away deadwood, you can see the shape of a sentence more clearly.

### 1. Meaningless words

Some polling sites reported various problems of a technical nature, but these did not really affect the election's actual result.

- ✓ Some polling sites reported technical problems, but these did not affect the election's result.

### 2. Redundant pairs

If and when we can define our final aims and goals, each and every member of our group will be ready and willing to offer aid and assistance.

- ✓ If we define our goals, we will all be ready to help.

### 3. Redundant modifiers

In the business world of today, official governmental red tape seriously destroys initiative among individual businesses.

- ✓ Government red tape destroys business initiative.

### 4. Redundant categories

In the area of education, tight financial conditions are forcing school boards to cut nonessential expenses.

- ✓ Tight finances are forcing school boards to cut nonessentials.

## 5. Obvious implications

Energy used to power industries and homes will in years to come cost more money.

- ✓ Energy will eventually cost more.

## 6. A phrase for a word

A sail-powered craft that has turned on its side or completely over must remain buoyant enough so that it will bear the weight of those individuals who were aboard.

- ✓ A capsized sailboat must support those on it.

## 7. Indirect negatives

There is no reason not to believe that engineering malfunctions in nuclear energy systems cannot be anticipated.

- ✓ Malfunctions in nuclear energy systems will surprise us.

## 8. Excessive metadiscourse

It is clearly the case that economic hardship encourages a certain amount of criminal activity that in many instances undermines the stability of communities.

- ✓ Economic hardship encourages crime, destabilizing communities.

## 9. Hedges and intensifiers

The only principle here is the Goldilocks rule: not too much, not too little, but just right. This is a matter where you have to develop and then trust your ear.

<b>Too certain:</b>	In my research, <b>I prove</b> that people with guns in their homes use them to kill themselves or family members instead of to protect themselves from intruders.
<b>Too uncertain:</b>	<b>Some</b> of my recent research <b>seems to imply</b> that there <b>may</b> be a <b>risk</b> that certain people with guns in their homes <b>could</b> be <b>more prone</b> to use them to kill themselves or family members than to protect themselves from <b>possible</b> intruders.
<b>Just right?</b>	My research indicates that people with guns in their homes are more likely to use them to kill themselves or family members than to protect themselves from intruders.

# Lesson 9

## Shape

*A long complicated sentence should force itself upon you,  
make you know yourself knowing it.*

—GERTRUDE STEIN

If you can write clear and concise sentences, you have achieved much. But a writer who can't write a clear sentence longer than twenty words or so is like a composer who can write only jingles. Some advise against long sentences, but you cannot communicate every complex idea in a short one: you have to know how to write a sentence that is both long and clear.

Consider this sentence:

In addition to the continual disagreements between Democrats and Republicans on the issues of the day, an explanation of why they so deeply distrust one another must include the divergent values and principles that give them their motivation, the support that arises from their distinct constituencies, and an acceleration of the history of conflict between them.

Even if that idea needs all those fifty-six words (it doesn't), they could be arranged into a more shapely sentence.

We can start revising by editing the abstractions into characters/subjects and actions/verbs and then breaking the sentence into shorter ones:

We want to explain why Democrats and Republicans have come to so deeply distrust one another. One reason is their continual disagreements on the issues of the day. We must also consider the divergent values and principles that motivate them, the distinct constituencies that support them, and the accelerating history of conflict between them.

But that passage feels choppy. We prefer something like this:

- ✓ To explain why Democrats and Republicans have come to so deeply distrust one another, we must consider not only their continual disagreements on the issues of the day but also the divergent values and principles that motivate them, the distinct constituencies that support them, and the accelerating history of conflict between them.



That sentence is only four words shorter than the first, but it is not ungainly. So it can't be length alone that makes a long sentence difficult. In this lesson, we focus on how to write longer sentences that are also clear and shapely.

Readers get a sense of shapeless length from four things:

- They don't find a sentence's point near its beginning.
- They have to wait too long to get to the verb in the main clause.
- After the verb, they have to slog through a series of tacked-on phrases and dependent clauses.
- They are stopped by one interruption after another.

## Starting with Your Point

Compare these two sentences:

High-deductible health plans and Health Saving Accounts into which workers and their employers make tax-deductible deposits result in workers taking more responsibility for their health care.

- ✓ Workers take more responsibility for their health care when they adopt high-deductible insurance plans and Health Saving Accounts into which they and their employers deposit tax-deductible contributions.

Unlike that lumbering first sentence, the second follows the most basic principles of clear writing: it begins not with a long, abstract subject but with a subject that names a character (*Workers*) followed by a verb stating a specific action (*take*).

But that second sentence differs in another way too. The first sentence feels backward because we have to read twenty words before we see their relevance to its key point. The second sentence, in contrast, opens with an eight-word main clause stating that point clearly and concisely: *Workers take more responsibility for their health care*. When we read its point first, we can anticipate the relevance of the next nineteen words *even before we read them*.

As readers, we handle complexity best when we can begin with something short and direct that frames the more complex information that follows. We have seen already how this principle applies to a sentence's *grammatical* elements (and we'll have more to say about that in this lesson as well). But it also applies to a sentence's *logical* elements, to its point and to its explanation or supporting information. When a point is dribbled out or delayed, we have to identify it and then mentally reassemble the sentence into its logical parts. A point clearly stated up front gives us a context to understand the complexity that follows.

In fact, this point-first principle applies to even larger units:

- Begin a paragraph with a sentence (or two) expressing its point so that readers can understand what follows (see pp. 106–107).
- Begin a section of a document with a paragraph or two stating its point (see pp. 101–104).
- Do the same for a whole document: begin with an introduction that states its point and frames the rest (see pp. 86–94).

Sentence, paragraph, section, or whole—how quickly, concisely, and *helpfully* you begin determines how easily your readers understand what follows.

## How to Revise: Long Openings

Readers like to find a sentence’s point near its beginning, but they won’t if a sentence takes forever to get started:

Since most undergraduate students change their major fields of study at least once during their college careers, many more than once, first-year students who are not certain about the majors they want to pursue should not load up their schedules to meet requirements for a particular program.

That sentence takes thirty-five words to get to its main verb phrase, *should ... load up*. Here are two rules of thumb about beginning a sentence: (1) Get to the subject of the main clause quickly. (2) Get to the verb and object quickly.

### Rule of Thumb 1: Get to the Subject Quickly

We have a problem with sentences that open with long introductory phrases and clauses, because as we read them, we have to keep in mind that the subject and verb of a main clause are still to come, and that load on our memory hinders easy understanding.

Compare these two versions. In **1a** we have to read and understand seventeen words (gold) before we get to its long main subject (underlined) and verb (bold-faced). In **1b**, we get past the short main subject and verb in just seven words:

1a. Since most undergraduate students change their major fields of study at least once during their college careers, first-year students who are not certain about the majors they want to pursue **should not load up** their schedules to meet requirements for a particular program.

✓ 1b. First-year students **should not load up** their schedules with requirements for a particular program if they are not certain about the majors they want to pursue, because most change their major fields of study at least once during their college careers.

When you find a sentence with a very long introductory clause, try moving that clause to the end. If it doesn't fit there, try turning it into a sentence of its own.

However, clauses beginning with *if*, *since*, *when*, and *although* usually refer to ideas already known and tend therefore to appear early in a sentence. If you choose to begin with such a clause, keep it short.

An exception is the style called *periodic* or *suspended*, in which writers deliberately pile up introductory subordinate clauses (subordinating conjunctions gold) to delay and thereby heighten the impact of a concluding main clause (boldfaced):

**When** a society spends more on its pets than it does on its homeless, **when** it rewards those who hit a ball the farthest more highly than those who care most deeply for its neediest, **when** it takes more interest in the juvenile behavior of its richest children than in the deficient education of its poorest, **it has lost its moral center.**

Used sparingly, this kind of sentence can have a dramatic impact, especially when the last few words of the last clause are appropriately stressed. We discuss this matter again in Lesson 10.

## Rule of Thumb 2: Get to the Verb and Object Quickly

Readers also want to get past the main subject to its verb and object. Therefore:

- Avoid long, abstract subjects.
- Avoid interrupting the subject-verb connection.
- Avoid interrupting the verb-object connection.

**Avoid long, abstract subjects.** Revise long subjects into short ones. Start by underlining whole subjects. If you find a subject longer than seven or eight words that includes a nominalization (capitalized), especially as the simple subject (italicized), try turning the nominalization into a verb (boldfaced) expressing an action (pink). Use a character (gold) as its simple subject:

The **company's** UNDERSTANDING of the drivers of its profitability in the South Asian market for small electronics helped it pursue new opportunities in Africa.

- ✓ The **company** was able to pursue new opportunities in Africa because **it understood** what drove profitability in the South Asian market for small electronics.

A subject can also be long if it includes a long relative clause:

A company **that focuses on hiring the best personnel and then trains them not just for the work they are hired to do but for higher-level jobs** is likely to earn the loyalty of its employees.

Try turning the relative clause into an introductory subordinate clause beginning with *when* or *if*:

- ✓ **When a company focuses on hiring the best personnel and then trains them not just for the work they are hired to do but for higher-level jobs**, it is likely to earn the loyalty of its employees.

But if the introductory clause turns out to be as long as that one, try moving it to the end of its sentence, especially if (1) the main clause is short and expresses the point of the sentence and (2) the moveable clause expresses newer and more complex information that supports or elaborates on the main clause:

- ✓ A company is likely to earn the loyalty of its employees **when it focuses on hiring the best personnel and then trains them not just for the work they are hired to do but for higher-level jobs.**

Or perhaps turn it into a sentence of its own:

- ✓ **Some companies focus on hiring the best personnel and then train them not just for the work they are hired to do but for higher-level jobs later.** Such companies are likely to earn the loyalty of their employees.

**Avoid interrupting the subject-verb connection.** You frustrate readers when you interrupt the connection between a subject and verb, like this:

- Some scientists, **because they write in a style that is impersonal and abstract,** do not easily communicate with laypeople.

That *because* clause after the subject forces us to mentally hold our breath until we reach the verb, *do ... communicate*. Move the interruption to the beginning or end of the sentence, depending on whether it connects more closely to what precedes or follows it (note the *since* instead of *because*).

- ✓ Since some scientists write in a style that is impersonal and abstract, they do **not easily communicate with laypeople. This lack of communication** damages...
- ✓ Some scientists do not easily communicate with laypeople because they write in **a style that is impersonal and abstract. It is a kind of style** filled with passives and...

We mind short interruptions less:

- ✓ Some scientists **deliberately** write in a style that is impersonal and abstract.

**Avoid interrupting the verb-object connection.** We also like to get quickly past the verb to its object. This sentence doesn't let us do that:

- We must develop, **if we are to become competitive with other companies in our region,** a core of knowledge regarding the state of the art in effective industrial organizations.

Move the interrupting element to the beginning or end of the sentence, depending on what comes next:

- ✓ **If we are to compete with other companies in our region,** we must develop a core of knowledge about the state of the art in **effective industrial organizations. Such organizations** provide...

- ✓ We must develop a core of knowledge about the state of the art in effective industrial organizations **if we are to compete with other companies in our region.**  
**Increasing competition . . .**

When a prepositional phrase you can move is shorter than a long object, you can also try putting the phrase between the verb and object:

- In a long sentence, put the newest and most important information that you want your reader to remember **at its end.**
- ✓ In a long sentence, put **at its end** the newest and most important information that you want your reader to remember.

## Here's the Point

Readers read most easily when you quickly get them to the subject of your main clause and then past that subject to its verb and object. Avoid long introductory phrases and clauses, long subjects, and interruptions between subjects and verbs and between verbs and objects.

## Exercise 9.1

These sentences have long subjects. Revise.

1. Explaining why Shakespeare decided to have Lady Macbeth die off stage rather than letting the audience see her die has to do with understanding the audience's reactions to Macbeth's death.
2. An agreement by the film industry and by television producers on limiting characters using cigarettes, even if carried out, would do little to discourage young people from smoking.
3. A student's right to have access to his or her own records, including medical records, academic reports, and confidential comments by advisers, will generally take precedence over an institution's desire to keep records private, except when limitations of those rights under specified circumstances are agreed to by students during registration.
4. Islamic advances in geometry, trigonometry, and algebra, as well as pioneering developments in decimal notation and irrational numbers, must be acknowledged in any complete account of the history of mathematics.

These sentences are ungainly because of interruptions. First, eliminate wordiness. Then correct the interruption.

5. Successful marriages, although they can vary in many ways, almost always exhibit among their many other positive attributes a strong foundation of trust between spouses.
6. "Reality" television, because it has an appeal to our fascination with real-life conflict because of our voyeuristic impulses, is about the most popular kind of show that people watch on television.

7. Insistence that there is no proof by scientific means of a causal link between tobacco consumption and various disease entities such as cardiac heart diseases and malignant growth, despite the fact that there is a strong statistical correlation between smoking behavior and such diseases, is no longer the officially stated position of cigarette companies.
8. The continued and unabated emission of carbon dioxide gas into the atmosphere, unless there is a marked reduction, will eventually result in serious changes in the climate of the world as we know it today.

These sentences have long introductory phrases and clauses. Revise. Try to open your revised sentence with its point.

9. While grade inflation has been a subject of debate by teachers and administrators and even in newspapers, employers looking for people with high levels of technical and analytical skills have not had difficulty identifying desirable candidates.
10. Although one way to prevent piracy of software is for criminal justice systems of the countries involved to move cases faster through their systems and for stiffer penalties to be imposed, no improvement in the level of expertise of judges who hear these cases is expected any time in the immediate future.
11. Since school officials responsible for setting policy about school security have said that local principals may require students to pass through metal detectors before entering a school building, the need to educate parents and students about the seriousness of bringing onto school property anything that looks like a weapon must be made a part of the total package of school security.
12. Even though the use of e-cigarettes, commonly known as vaping, is undoubtedly less harmful than smoking conventional cigarettes, the fact that teenagers and even children are deliberately targeted by e-cigarette manufacturers suggests that the development of sensible regulations for the industry must be made a legislative priority.

## How to Revise: Sprawling Endings

This next sentence starts well but then sprawls through a string of four explanatory dependent clauses:

No scientific advance is more exciting than genetic engineering, <sup>point</sup> which is a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, which are the genes and chromosomes that tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts that constitute our bodies. <sup>explanation</sup>

Graphically, it looks like this:

No scientific advance is more exciting than genetic engineering, *[point and main subject and verb]*

**which** is a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, *[tacked-on relative clause]*

**which** are the genes and chromosomes [*tacked-on relative clause*]

**that** tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts [*tacked-on relative clause*]

**that** constitute our bodies. [*final tacked-on relative clause*]

You can identify this problem by having someone read your writing aloud. If that reader hesitates, stumbles over words, or runs out of breath before getting to the end of a sentence, so will someone reading it silently. You can revise in four ways: cut, turn dependent clauses into independent sentences, change clauses to modifying phrases, or coordinate.

## Cut

Try reducing some of the relative clauses to phrases by deleting *who/that/which* + *is/was*, etc.:

- ✓ Of the many areas of science important to our future, few are more promising than genetic engineering, ~~which is~~ a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, ~~which are~~ the genes and chromosomes that tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts that constitute our bodies.

Occasionally, you have to turn the remaining verb into a *present participle* by adding *-ing*:

- The day is coming when we will all have numbers **that will identify** our financial transactions so that the IRS can monitor all those **that involve** economic activity.
- ✓ The day is coming when we will all have numbers ~~that will~~ **identifying** our financial transactions so that the IRS can monitor all those ~~that~~ **involving** economic activity.

## Turn Dependent Clauses into Independent Sentences

- ✓ Many areas of science are important to our future, but few are more promising than genetic engineering. It is a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, the genes and chromosomes that tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts that constitute our bodies.

## Change Clauses to Modifying Phrases

You can write a long sentence but still avoid sprawl if you change relative clauses to one of three kinds of modifier: *resumptive*, *summative*, or *free*. You have probably never heard these terms before, but they name stylistic devices you have read many times and so should know how to use.

**Resumptive Modifiers** These two examples contrast a relative clause and a resumptive modifier:

Since mature writers often use resumptive modifiers to extend a line of thought, we need a word to name what we have not done in this sentence, **which we**

could have ended at that comma but extended to show you a relative clause attached to a noun.

- ✓ Since mature writers often use resumptive modifiers to extend a line of thought, we need a word to name what we are about to do in this sentence, **a sentence that we could have ended at that comma but extended to show you how resumptive modifiers work.**

The boldfaced resumptive modifier repeats a key word, *sentence*, and rolls on.

To create a resumptive modifier, find the noun (boldfaced) modified by the tacked-on clause, add a comma after it to create a pause, repeat the noun, and continue with a restrictive relative clause beginning with *that*:

Since mature writers often use resumptive modifiers to extend a line of thought, we need a word to name what we are about to do in this **sentence**,

**a sentence** that we could have ended at that comma but extended to show you how resumptive modifiers work.

You can also resume with an adjective or verb. In that case, you don't add a relative clause; you just repeat the adjective or verb and continue:

- ✓ It was American writers who found a voice that was both **true** and **lyrical**,  
**true** to the rhythms of workers' speech and **lyrical** in its celebration of their labor.
- ✓ All who value independence should **resist** the trivialization of government regulation,  
**resist** its obsession with administrative tidiness and compulsion to arrange things not for our convenience but for theirs.

Occasionally, you can create a resumptive modifier with the phrase *one that*:

- ✓ I now address a problem we have wholly ignored, **one that** has plagued societies that sell their natural resources to benefit a few today rather than using them to develop new industries that will benefit everyone tomorrow.

**Summative Modifiers** Here are two sentences that contrast relative clauses and summative modifiers. Notice how the *which* in the first one feels "tacked on":

Economic changes have reduced the region's population growth to less than zero, **which will have serious social implications.**

- ✓ Economic changes have reduced the region's population growth to less than zero, **a demographic event that will have serious social implications.**

To create a summative modifier, end a grammatically complete segment of a sentence with a comma, add a term that sums up the substance of the sentence so far (boldfaced), and continue with a restrictive relative clause beginning with *that*:

- ✓ Economic changes have reduced the region's population growth to less than zero, **a demographic event** that will have serious social implications.



A summative modifier has the same effect as a resumptive modifier: it lets you bring a clause to a sense of closure, then begin afresh.

**Free Modifiers** Like the other modifiers, a free modifier can appear at the end of a clause, but instead of repeating a key word or summing up what went before, it comments on the subject of the closest verb:

- ✓ Free modifiers resemble resumptive and summative modifiers, **letting you** [i.e., the free modifier lets you] **extend the line of a sentence while avoiding a train of ungainly phrases and clauses.**

Free modifiers usually begin with a present participle, as that one did, but they can also begin with a past participle, like this:

- ✓ Leonardo da Vinci was a man of powerful intellect,  
                   **driven** by [i.e., Leonardo was driven by] an insatiable curiosity and  
                   **haunted** by a vision of artistic perfection.

A free modifier can also begin with an adjective:

- ✓ On a chilly November night in 2008, Barack Obama gave a rousing speech in Grant Park in Chicago,  
                   **aware** [i.e., Obama was aware] that he was about to become the first black president of the United States.

We call these modifiers *free* because they can either begin or end a sentence:

- ✓ **Driven by an insatiable curiosity and haunted by a vision of artistic perfection,** Leonardo da Vinci was...
- ✓ **Aware that he was about to become the first black president of the United States,** Barack Obama gave...

## Here's the Point

When you have to write a long sentence, don't just string together phrases and clauses willy-nilly. Particularly avoid tacking one relative clause onto another onto another. Try extending the line of a sentence with resumptive, summative, and free modifiers.

## Coordinate

*Coordination* is the foundation of a gracefully shaped sentence. It's harder to create good coordination than good modifiers, but when done well, it's more graceful. Compare these. Our version is first; the original is second:

The aspiring artist may find that even a minor, unfinished work which was botched may be an instructive model for how things should be done, while for the amateur spectator, such works are the daily fare which may provide good, honest nourishment, which can lead to an appreciation of deeper pleasures that are also more refined.

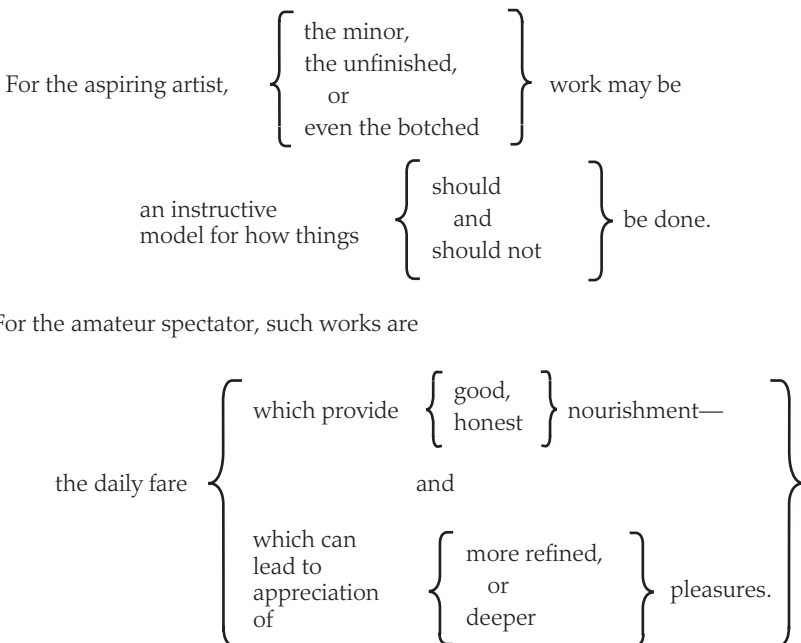
- ✓ For the aspiring artist, the minor, the unfinished, or even the botched work, may be an instructive model for how things should—and should not be done. For the amateur spectator, such works are the daily fare which provide good, honest nourishment—and which can lead to appreciation of more refined, or deeper pleasures.

—Eva Hoffman, “Minor Art Offers Special Pleasures”

Our revision sprawls through a string of tacked-on clauses:

The aspiring artist may find that even a minor, unfinished work  
**which** was botched may be an instructive model for  
**how** things should be done,  
**while** for the amateur spectator, such works are the daily fare  
**which** may provide good, honest nourishment,  
**which** can lead to an appreciation of deeper pleasures  
**that** are also more refined.

Hoffman’s original gets its shape from its multiple coordinations. Structurally, it looks like this:



That second sentence in particular shows how elaborate coordination can get.

## Short before Long

This short-before-long principle aligns with our other principle of simple before complex. (It obviously takes fewer words to say something simple than to say something complex.) We introduced a version of it in Lesson 3, where we encouraged you to keep your subjects short. But it applies to phrases and clauses of all sorts, not just subjects. Sentences displaying well-formed coordination typically move from short phrases and clauses to longer ones. You can hear the effect if you read this next sentence aloud:

We should devote a few final words to a matter that reaches beyond the techniques of research to the connections between those subjective values that reflect our deepest ethical choices and objective research.

That sentence seems to end too abruptly with *objective research*. Structurally, it looks like this:

... between  $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{those subjective values that reflect our} \\ \text{deepest ethical choices} \\ \text{and} \\ \text{objective research.} \end{array} \right\}$

This next revision moves from shorter to longer by reversing the two coordinate elements and by adding a *parallelism* to the second one to make it longer still. Read this one aloud:

- ✓ We should devote a few final words to a matter that reaches beyond the techniques of research to the connections between objective research and those subjective values that reflect our deepest ethical choices and strongest intellectual commitments.

Structurally, it looks like this:

✓ ... between  $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{objective research} \\ \text{and} \\ \text{those subjective} \\ \text{values that reflect our} \end{array} \right\} \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{deepest ethical choices} \\ \text{and} \\ \text{strongest intellectual} \\ \text{commitments.} \end{array} \right\}$

A characteristic of especially elegant prose is how its writers employ all these devices for extending the line of a sentence, especially balanced coordination. That's a topic for Lesson 10.

This principle of short before long is, in fact, one of the unifying principles of a clear prose style:

- It applies to the subject-verb sequence of individual sentences: short subjects better introduce longer, more complex elements that follow.
- It is consistent with the principle of old before new: old information is usually objectively shorter than new information, but it is “psychologically” shorter as well.
- It governs the order of logical elements of a long sentence: a sentence is clearer when it begins with a short statement of its point and then adds the longer and more complex explanatory or supporting information.
- It applies again here in balanced coordination: put shorter elements before longer ones.

## Here’s the Point

Coordination lets you extend the line of a sentence more gracefully than by tacking on one element to another. When you can coordinate, try to order the elements so that they go from shorter to longer, from simpler to more complex.

## Quick Tip

You can emphasize a coordination with correlative conjunctions: *both X and Y*, *not only X but also Y*, (*n*)*either X (n)or Y*. Compare these:

- ✓ The world’s tallest building, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, is an engineering marvel and a construction of stunning beauty.
- ✓ The world’s tallest building, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, is **not only** an engineering marvel **but also** a construction of stunning beauty.

When you use one of these conjunctions, however, be sure to put the *and*, *but*, or (*n*)*or* before a word that is coordinate with what follows the *both*, *not only*, and (*n*)*either*. In the first sentence below, *both* precedes the verb while the *and* precedes its subject:

When you punctuate carefully, you **both** *help* readers understand a complex sentence more easily **and** *you* enhance your own image as a good writer.

They should precede the same part of speech:

- ✓ When you punctuate carefully, you **both** *help* readers understand a complex sentence more easily **and** *enhance* your own image as a good writer.

## Exercise 9.2

Edit these sentences to address redundancy, wordiness, nominalizations, and other problems. Then expand them by creating resumptive, summative, and free modifiers of your own. In the first two, start a resumptive modifier with the word in boldface. Then use the word in brackets to create another sentence with a summative modifier. For example:

| Within ten years, we could meet our energy **needs** with solar power. [a possibility]

### Resumptive:

| ✓ Within ten years, we could meet our energy **needs** with solar power, **needs** that will soar as our population grows.

### Summative:

| ✓ Within ten years, we could meet our energy needs with solar power, **a possibility** that few anticipated ten years ago.

### Free:

| ✓ Within ten years, we could meet our energy needs with solar power, **reducing** carbon emissions dramatically.

Again, first edit these sentences to make them more clear and concise, and only then extend them by adding modifiers.

1. Many different school systems are making a return back to traditional education in the **basics**. [a change]
2. Within the period of the last few years or so, automobile manufacturers have been trying to meet new and more stringent-type quality control **requirements**. [a challenge]
3. The reasons for the cause of aging are a puzzle that has perplexed humanity for millennia.
4. The majority of young people in the world of today cannot even begin to have an understanding of the insecurity that a large number of older people had experienced during the period of the Great Depression.

## Troubleshooting Long Sentences

Even when they begin well and don't sprawl, long sentences can still go wrong. Here are some common problems.

### Faulty Grammatical Coordination

Ordinarily, we coordinate elements only of the same grammatical structure: clause and clause, prepositional phrase and prepositional phrase, and so on. When you coordinate different grammatical structures, readers may feel you have created an offensive lack of parallelism. Careful writers avoid this:

The committee  
recommends

{ **revising the curriculum** to recognize  
trends in local employment  
and  
**that the division be reorganized** to  
reflect the new curriculum. }

They would correct that to this:

✓ . . . recommends

{ **that the curriculum be revised**  
to recognize . . .  
and  
**that the division be reorganized**  
to reflect . . . }

Or to this:

✓ . . . recommends

{ **revising the curriculum**  
to recognize . . .  
and  
**reorganizing the division**  
to reflect . . . }

However, some nonparallel coordinations do occur in well-written prose. Careful writers coordinate a noun phrase with a *how* clause:

✓ We will attempt to delineate

{ **the problems** of education  
in developing nations  
and  
**how coordinated efforts**  
**can address** them in  
economical ways. }

They coordinate an adverb with a prepositional phrase:

✓ The proposal appears  
to have been written

{ **quickly,**  
**carefully,**  
and  
**with the help** of many. }

Careful readers do not blink at either.

## Faulty Rhetorical Coordination

We respond to coordination best when the elements are coordinate not only in grammar but also in thought. Some inexperienced writers coordinate by just joining one element to another with *and*:

Grade inflation is a problem at many universities, **and** it leads to a devaluation of good grades earned by hard work **and** will not be solved simply by grading harder.

Those *ands* obscure the relationships among those claims:

- ✓ Grade inflation is a problem at many universities **because** it devalues good grades that were earned by hard work, **but** it will not be solved simply by grading harder.

Unfortunately, there's no rule that will tell you how to recognize when elements are not coordinate in thought; you just have to watch for it.

## Unclear Connections

Readers are bothered by a coordination so long that they lose track of its internal connections and pronoun references:

Teachers should remember that students are vulnerable and uncertain about those everyday ego-bruising moments that adults ignore and that they do not understand that one day they will become as confident and as secure as the adults that bruise them.

We sense a flicker of hesitation about where to connect:

| ... and that they do not understand that one day they ...

To revise a sentence like that, shorten the first half of the coordination so that you can start the second half closer to the point where the coordination began:

- ✓ Teachers should remember that students are vulnerable to ego-bruising moments that adults ignore and that they do not understand that one day ...

Or repeat a word that reminds the reader where the coordination began (thereby creating a resumptive modifier):

- ✓ Teachers should remember that students are vulnerable to ego-bruising moments that adults ignore, **remember** that they do not understand that ...

Or repeat a noun to avoid an ambiguous pronoun:

- ✓ Teachers should remember that **students** are vulnerable to ego-bruising moments that adults ignore and that **students** do not understand that one day ...

## Ambiguous Modifiers

Sometimes modifiers are positioned so that readers are unsure what they modify:

| Overtaxing oneself in physical activity too frequently results in injury.

What happens too frequently, overtaxing or injuries? We can make its meaning unambiguous by moving *too frequently*:

| ✓ Overtaxing oneself too frequently in physical activity results in injury.

| ✓ Overtaxing oneself in physical activity results too frequently in injury.

A modifier at the end of a clause can ambiguously modify either a neighboring or a more distant phrase:

| Scientists have learned that their observations are as subjective as those in any other field **in recent years**.

We can move the modifier to a less ambiguous position:

| ✓ **In recent years**, scientists have learned that ...

| ✓ Scientists have learned that **in recent years** ...

## Dangling Modifiers

Another problem with a long sentence can be a dangling modifier. A modifier dangles when its implied subject differs from the explicit subject of the main clause:

| Running through the airport to avoid missing the flight, dangling modifier the phone she had purchased only a week before whole subject fell out of her jacket pocket and shattered on the cement floor.

The explicit subject of the main clause is *phone*, but the implied subject of *running* in the modifier is *she* (phones can't run!). To undangle the modifier, we need to make its implicit subject explicit:

| ✓ As **she** was running through the airport to avoid missing the flight, the phone she had purchased only a week before fell out of her jacket pocket and shattered on the cement floor.

Or better, just make the implicit subject of the modifier the explicit subject of the clause:

| ✓ Running through the airport to avoid missing the flight, **she** let the phone she had purchased only a week before fall out of her jacket pocket and shatter on the cement floor.



## Exercise 9.3 In Your Own Words

Two rules of thumb for beginning sentences are (1) get to the subject quickly and (2) get to the verb and object quickly (see pp. 127–130). Go through a page of your writing and underline the first seven or eight words of every sentence. Revise those in which you do not come to the subject and the verb in those opening words.

## Exercise 9.4 In Your Own Words

It is difficult for writers to identify their bad habits because they know their own writing too well. So have a reader help you identify yours:

- Do you take too long to get to your subjects and verbs?
- Are your subjects too long?
- Do you interrupt the connection between subject and verb, or verb and object?
- Do you take too long to make your point (in sentences and in passages)?
- Do you add dependent clause to dependent clause to dependent clause?

Have a reader go through a few pages of your writing and draw a line beside any passages that seemed unclear or difficult to get through, naming the cause of the difficulty if she can. If she can't, analyze the rough passages together. (You can trust a reader's judgment that *something* is amiss, even if that reader can't say exactly *what*.) Then revise.

## Summing Up

Here are the principles for giving sentences a coherent shape.

### 1. Get quickly to the subject, then to the verb and its object:

- a. Avoid long introductory phrases and clauses. Revise them into their own independent clauses:

**Since most undergraduate students change their major fields of study at least once during their college careers, many more than once,** first-year students who are not certain about the majors they want to pursue should not load up their schedules to meet requirements for a particular program.

- ✓ **Most undergraduate students change their major fields of study at least once during their college careers,** so first-year students should not load up their schedules with requirements for a particular program if they are not certain about the majors they want to pursue.

- b. Avoid long subjects. Revise a long subject into an introductory subordinate clause:

**A company that focuses on hiring the best personnel and then trains them not just for the work they are hired to do but for higher-level jobs** is likely to earn the loyalty of its employees.

- ✓ When a company focuses on hiring the best personnel and then trains them not just for the work they are hired to do but for higher-level jobs later, it is likely to earn the loyalty of its employees.

If the new introductory clause is long, shift it to the end of its sentence:

- ✓ A company is likely to earn the loyalty of its employees **when it focuses on hiring the best personnel ...**

Or just break it out in a sentence of its own:

- ✓ **Some companies focus on hiring the best personnel and then train them not just for the work they are hired to do but for higher-level jobs later.** Such companies are likely to earn the loyalty of their employees.

- Avoid interrupting subjects and verbs and also verbs and objects. Move the interrupting element to either the beginning or end of the sentence, depending on what the next sentence is about:

Some scientists, **because they write in a style that is impersonal and abstract**, do not easily communicate with laypeople.

- ✓ **Since some scientists write in a style that is impersonal and abstract**, they do not easily communicate with laypeople. This lack of communication damages ...
- ✓ Some scientists do not easily communicate with laypeople **because they write in a style that is impersonal and abstract**. It is a kind of style filled with passives ...

- Open the sentence with its point in a short main clause stating the key claim that you want the sentence to make:

A new sales initiative that has created a close integration between the garden and home products departments has made **significant improvements to the customer services that Acme offers**.

- ✓ **Acme has significantly improved its customer services** with a new sales initiative that closely integrates the garden and home products departments.

- After the main clause, avoid adding one dependent clause to another to another to another:

- Trim relative clauses and break the sentences into two:

Of the many areas of science **that** are important to our future, few are more promising than genetic engineering, **which** is a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, **which** are the genes and chromosomes **that** tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts **that** constitute our bodies.

- ✓ Many areas of science are important to our future, but few are more promising than genetic engineering. It is a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, **which** are the genes and chromosomes **that** tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts that constitute our bodies.
- ✓ Of the many areas of science ~~that are~~ important to our future, few are more promising than genetic engineering, ~~which is~~ a new way of manipulating the elemental structural units of life itself, ~~which are~~ the genes and chromosomes that tell our cells how to reproduce to become the parts ~~that~~ constituting our bodies.

b. Extend a sentence with a resumptive, summative, or free modifier:

- ✓ **Resumptive:** When we discovered the earth was not the center of the universe, it changed our understanding of who we are, **an understanding changed again by Darwin, again by Freud, and again by Einstein.**
- ✓ **Summative:** Economic productivity has risen to new heights, **an achievement that only a decade ago was considered an impossible dream.**
- ✓ **Free:** Climate change has become the central political issue of the twenty-first century, **raising questions whose answers will affect the lives of people everywhere.**

c. Coordinate elements that are parallel both in grammar and in sense:

Besides the fact that no civilization has experienced such rapid alterations in their spiritual and mental lives, the material conditions of their daily existence have changed greatly too.

- ✓ No civilization has experienced such rapid alterations in their spiritual and mental lives and in the material conditions of daily existence.

A last note: to write a long complex sentence that is also clear, you may need punctuation to help your reader through it. See Appendix I.

# Lesson 10

## Elegance

*Read over your compositions, and wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.*

—SAMUEL JOHNSON

Anyone who can write clearly, concisely, and coherently should rejoice to have achieved so much. But while most readers prefer straightforward clarity to the density of institutional prose, relentless simplicity can be dry, even arid. It has the spartan virtue of unsalted meat and potatoes, but like such fare, it is rarely memorable. A flash of elegance, though, can both fix a thought in our minds and give us a flicker of pleasure when we recall it. While there are no simple principles you can follow to ensure that readers will find your writing elegant, we can show you some devices that, used well, give you a chance of achieving that effect. Just knowing them, however, won't let you write elegantly, any more than knowing an accomplished chef's methods and recipes will let you cook her signature dish. Like great cooking, elegant writing is a matter not of rules but of taste, talent, and technique. But taste and talent can be educated and exercised, and techniques can be learned and practiced.

### Balance

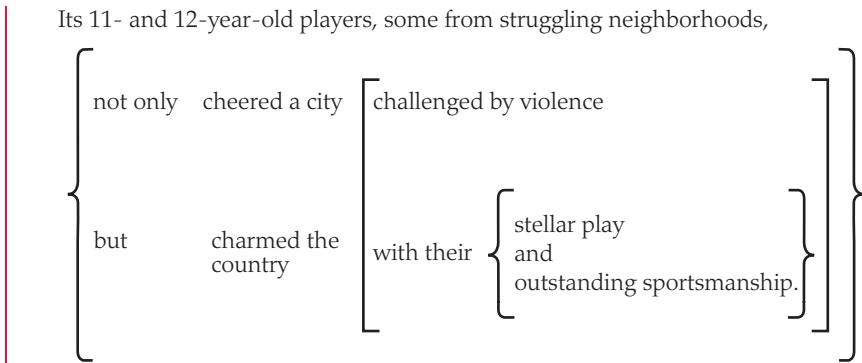
What most makes a sentence graceful is a balance or symmetry among its parts, one echoing another in sound, rhythm, structure, and meaning. A skilled writer can balance almost any parts of a sentence, but the most common balance is based on coordination.

**Coordinate Balance** Here is a balanced sentence from a newspaper editorial decrying a decision to strip a Chicago-area Little League team of its national championship (the team was the first composed entirely of African American players to win the national title; Little League International found that the local league had improperly recruited the team's players):

Its 11- and 12-year-old players, some from struggling neighborhoods, not only cheered a city challenged by violence but charmed the country with their stellar play and outstanding sportsmanship.

—Editorial Board, *Washington Post*

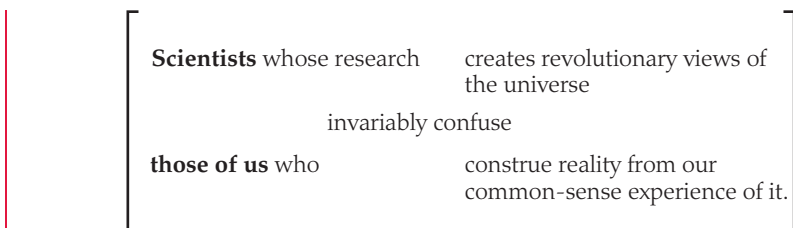
Notice how that sentence balances its two verb phrases (curly brackets show coordinate balance, square brackets show noncoordinate balance):



- The verb *charmed* echoes and amplifies the earlier *cheered*, with which it alliterates (or shares consonant sounds).
- The second direct object *country* contrasts with the first, *city*, an effect enhanced by the different articles that introduce these words.
- The participial phrase *challenged by violence*, which modifies *city*, is balanced by the prepositional phrase *with their stellar play and outstanding sportsmanship*, which modifies *country*. (This is an example of noncoordinate balance, in which different grammatical structures are balanced. Coordinate balance would have required another participial phrase: “but charmed a country inspired by stellar play...”)
- This prepositional phrase not only contrasts the city’s *violence* with the team’s *play* and *sportsmanship* but elegantly extends the line of the sentence with its compound object, itself composed of two alliterative and coordinate noun phrases. (To experience this effect, try swapping the verb phrases so the sentence reads “not only charmed...but cheered...” and hear the difference.)

For those who care, sentences such as these are impressive constructions.

**Noncoordinate Balance** We can also balance structures that are not grammatically coordinate. In this example, the subject balances the object:





Now try this:

In his earliest years, Picasso was **not only** a master draftsman of the traditional human form, **but also**...

To finish, you have to wonder what else he might—or might not—have been.

## Here's the Point

The most striking feature of elegant prose is balanced sentence structure. You most easily balance one part of a sentence against another by coordinating them with *and*, *or*, *nor*, *but*, and *yet*, but you can also balance noncoordinate phrases and clauses. Used to excess, these patterns can seem merely clever, but used prudently, they can emphasize an important point or conclude a line of reasoning with a flourish that careful readers notice.

## Climactic Emphasis

How you begin a sentence determines its clarity; how you end it determines its rhythm and grace. Here are five ways to end a sentence with special emphasis.

### 1. Weighty Words

When we get close to the end of a sentence, we expect words that deserve stress (pp. 73–75), so we may feel a sentence is anticlimactic if it ends on words of slight weight, either grammatically or in meaning. At the end of a sentence, prepositions feel light—one reason we sometimes avoid leaving one there. The rhythm of a sentence should carry readers toward strength. Compare:

A study of intellectual differences among ethnicities is a project that only the most politically naive psychologist would be willing to give support to.

- ✓ A study of intellectual differences among ethnicities is a project that only the most politically naive psychologist would be willing to support.

Adjectives and adverbs are heavier than prepositions but lighter than nouns, the heaviest of which are nominalizations. Readers have problems with nominalizations in the subject of a sentence, but at the end they provide a satisfyingly climactic thump, particularly when two of them are in coordinate balance. Consider this excerpt from Winston Churchill's "Finest Hour" speech. Churchill ended it with a parallelism climaxing with a balanced pair of nouns:

... until in God's good time,

the New World, with all its  $\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{power} \\ \text{and} \\ \text{might} \end{array} \right\}$  steps forth to

$\left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{the rescue} \\ \text{and} \\ \text{the liberation} \end{array} \right\}$  of the old.

He could have written more simply and more banally:

... until the New World rescues and liberates us.

## 2. Of + Weighty Word

This seems unlikely, but it's true. Look at how Churchill ends his sentence: the light *of* (followed by a lighter *a* or *the*) quickens the rhythm of a sentence just before the stress of the climactic monosyllable, *old*:

...the rescue and the liberation of the **old**.

We associate this pattern with self-conscious elegance, as in the first few sentences of Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (not *History of the Roman Empire's Decline and Fall*):

- ✓ In the second century of the Christian era, the Empire of Rome comprehended **the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind**. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded **by ancient renown and disciplined valour**. The gentle but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented **the union of the provinces**. Their peaceful inhabitants **enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury**. The image of a free constitution was preserved with decent reverence: the Roman senate appeared to possess the sovereign authority, and devolved on the emperors all **the executive powers of government**.

In contrast, this is flat:

In the second century AD, the Roman Empire comprehended **the earth's fairest, most civilized part**. Ancient renown and disciplined valour guarded **its extensive frontiers**. The gentle but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually **unified the provinces**. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused luxurious wealth while decently preserving what seemed to be **a free constitution**. Appearing to possess the sovereign authority, the Roman senate devolved on the emperors all **executive governmental powers**.



### 3. Echoing Salience

At the end of a sentence, readers hear special emphasis when a stressed word or phrase balances the sound or meaning of an earlier one. These examples are all from Peter Gay's *Style in History*:

- ✓ I have written these essays to anatomize this familiar yet really strange being, **style the centaur**; the book may be read as an extended critical commentary on Buffon's famous saying that **the style is the man**.

When we hear a stressed word echo an earlier one, these balances become even more emphatic:

- ✓ Apart from a few mechanical tricks of rhetoric, **manner** is indissolubly linked to **matter**; **style shapes**, and in turn is **shaped** by, **substance**.
- ✓ It seems frivolous, almost inappropriate, to be **stylish** about **style**.

Gay echoes both the sound and meaning of *manner* in *matter*, *style* in *substance*, *shapes* in *shaped by*, and *stylish* in *style*.

### 4. Chiasmus

The word *chiasmus* (pronounced kye-AZZ-muss) is from the Greek word for "crossing." A chiasmus balances elements in two parts of a sentence, but the second part reverses the order of the elements in the first part. For example, the elements of this next sentence are both coordinate and parallel, but it does not end with a chiasmus because the elements in the two parts are in the same order (**1A1B : 2A2B**):

- ✓ A concise style  
can improve both
- $$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{our own}^{1A} \quad \text{thinking}^{1B} \\ \text{and} \\ \text{our readers}^{2A} \quad \text{understanding}^{2B} \end{array} \right\}$$

Were we seeking a special effect, we could reverse the order of elements in the second part to mirror those in the first. Now the pattern is not **1A1B : 2A2B**, but rather **1A1B : 2B2A**:

- ✓ A concise style  
can improve not only
- $$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{our own}^{1A} \quad \text{thinking}^{1B} \\ \text{but} \\ \text{the understanding}^{2B} \text{ of our readers.}^{2A} \end{array} \right\}$$

The next example is more complex. The first two elements are parallel, but the last three mirror one another (**AB CDE : AB EDC**):

You<sup>1A</sup> reveal<sup>1B</sup> **your own**<sup>1C</sup> *highest rhetorical*<sup>1D</sup> SKILL<sup>1E</sup>  
 by the way  
 you<sup>2A</sup> respect<sup>2B</sup> THE BELIEFS<sup>2E</sup> *most deeply held*<sup>2D</sup> **by your reader.**<sup>2C</sup>

## 5. Suspension

Finally, you can wind up a sentence with a dramatic climax by ignoring some earlier advice. In Lesson 9 we advised you to open a sentence with its point. But self-consciously elegant writers often open a sentence with a series of parallel and coordinate phrases or clauses just so that they can delay and thereby heighten a sense of climax:

If [journalists] held themselves as responsible for the rise of public cynicism as they hold “venal” politicians and the “selfish” public; if they considered that the license they have to criticize and defame comes with an implied responsibility to serve the public—if they did all or any of these things, they would make journalism more useful, public life stronger, and themselves far more worthy of esteem.

—James Fallows, *Breaking the News*

That sentence (the last one in Fallows’s book) opens with three *if* clauses and ends with a triple coordination. It ends on its longest member, one that itself ends with an *of* + nominalization (*worthy of esteem*). Like all such devices, however, the impact of a long suspension is inversely proportional to its frequency of use: the less it’s used, the bigger its bang.

## Here’s the Point

An elegant sentence should end on strength. You can create that strength in five ways:

1. End with a strong word, or better, a pair of them.
2. End with a prepositional phrase introduced by *of*.
3. End with an echoing salience.
4. Use a chiasmus.
5. Use a suspension to build up to the end.

## Extravagant Elegance

When writers combine all these elements in a single sentence, we know they are aiming at something special, as in this next passage:

Far from being locked inside our own skins, inside the “dungeons” of ourselves, we are now able to recognize that our minds belong, quite naturally, to a collective “mind,” a mind in which we share everything that is mental, most obviously language itself, and

that the old boundary of the skin is not boundary at all but a membrane connecting the inner and outer experience of existence. Our intelligence, our wit, our cleverness, our unique personalities—all are simultaneously “our own” possessions and the world’s.

—Joyce Carol Oates, "New Heaven and New Earth"

Here is the anatomy of that passage:

Far from being locked **inside** our own skins,

**inside** the “dungeons” of ourselves,

we are now able to recognize

that our minds belong, quite naturally, to a collective “**mind**,”

**a mind** in which we share

everything that is *mental*,  
most obviously *language*  
*itself*,

and

that the old boundary of the skin is

not *boundary* at all  
but  
a *membrane* connecting  
the inner and outer  
**experience of existence.**

Our intelligence,  
our wit,  
our cleverness,  
our unique  
personalities

- all are simultaneously

“our own” possessions  
and  
the world’s.

In addition to all the coordination, note the two resumptive modifiers:

Far from being locked **inside** our own skins,

**inside** the “dungeons” of ourselves...

our minds belong...to a collective “**mind,**”

**a mind** in which we share...

Note too the two nominalizations stressed at the end of the first sentence and the coordinate nominalizations at the end of the second:

...the inner and outer experience of existence.

...“our own” possessions and the world’s.

## Exercise 10.1

Here are some first halves of sentences to finish with balancing last halves. For example, suppose you are given this:

Those who keep silent over the loss of small freedoms ...

Then finish with something like this:

... will be silenced when they protest the loss of large ones.

1. Those who argue stridently over small matters...
2. While the strong are often afraid to admit weakness, the weak...
3. Some teachers mistake neat papers that rehash old ideas for...
4. When parents raise children who scorn hard work, the adults those children become will...

## Exercise 10.2

These sentences end weakly. Edit them for clarity and concision, then revise them so that they end on more heavily stressed words, particularly with prepositional phrases beginning with *of*. For example:

Our interest in paranormal phenomena testifies to the fact that we have **empty spirits and shallow minds**.

- ✓ Our interest in paranormal phenomena testifies to **the emptiness of our spirits and the shallowness of our minds**.

In the first three, words you might nominalize are boldfaced.

1. If we invest our sweat in these projects, we must avoid appearing to work only because we are **interested** in ourselves.
2. The plan for the political campaign was concocted by those who were not sensitive to what we **needed** most critically.
3. Throughout history, science has made progress because dedicated scientists have ignored a **hostile** public that is uninformed.
4. Nothing has changed the quality of our social interactions more than communication technologies that are pervasive and very powerful.
5. Our most ethical choices are based not on what is most convenient in the moment but on moral principles that do not change from situation to situation.
6. At its best, her music conveys not just how painful losing someone can be but also how remembering that person consoles us.

## Nuances of Length and Rhythm

Most writers don't think much about the lengths of their sentences, and that's usually fine—unless every sentence is shorter than fifteen words or so, or much longer. Artful writers, however, do manage the lengths of their sentences purposefully.

Here, Mary Wollstonecraft varies the length and form of her sentences to capture the sounds of a waterfall and the flood of thoughts and feelings it inspired:

The impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cavities which mocked the exploring eye produced an equal activity in my mind. My thoughts darted from earth to heaven, and I asked myself why I was chained to life and its misery. Still the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited were pleasurable; and, viewing it, my soul rose with renewed dignity above its cares. Grasping at immortality—it seemed as impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me; I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come.

We turned with regret from the cascade.

—*Letters Written During a  
Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*

Her first sentence echoes the rush of the water by sprawling over two prepositional phrases and a relative clause before it reaches its verb. Her forty-one-word fourth sentence, with its erratic syntax and punctuation, similarly mirrors her rushing reflections. The very short sentence that begins the next paragraph contrasts starkly with those that precede it, announcing through its style as well as its sense the end of her reverie.

### Exercise 10.3

Find three passages from your own reading in which writers vary the lengths of their sentences. What is the effect of this variation on the rhythm and meaning of the passages? Rewrite the passages so that their sentences are consistently fifteen to twenty-five words long. What is the effect of this change?

## Elegance and Clarity

We have seen how intricate elegant sentences and passages can become. But that fact shouldn't blind us to a more basic one: for a sentence or passage to be elegant, it must first be clear and coherent. Remember our seven major principles:

1. **Characters as subjects.** Use main characters in your "story" as the subjects of most of your sentences.
2. **Actions as verbs.** Express the main actions performed by (or on) these characters as verbs, not nouns.

3. **Old before new.** Begin sentences with familiar information; end them with information readers cannot predict.
4. **Simple before complex.** Open with simple concepts or grammatical units; put more complex concepts or grammatical units later in the sentence, where readers can handle them better.
5. **Short before long.** Begin with a short, easily grasped segment of information that frames the longer, more complex segments that follow. This principle applies not only to sentences but also to paragraphs, sections, and whole documents.
6. **Begin with the topic.** Begin your sentences by announcing their topics, what they are “about” or “comment on.”
7. **End on stress.** End your sentences with words that should receive special emphasis.

Now look again at the example with which we began this lesson, that sentence from the *Washington Post*:

Its 11- and 12-year-old players, some from struggling neighborhoods, not only cheered a city challenged by violence but charmed the country with their stellar play and outstanding sportsmanship.

That sentence follows our principles straightforwardly:

- The subject *players* is a main character.
- The actions *cheered* and *charmed* are verbs.
- The sentence opens by repeating information from the preceding sentence, which mentions both the team and its players. It then tells us something new: that these players cheered the city and charmed the country.
- The sentence begins with a short segment (*Its 11- and 12-year-old players*) that announces its topic.
- The sentence ends by stressing those qualities that have endeared the players to the country: their superior play and sportsmanship.
- The second verb phrase is slightly longer than the first because of the compound object of the prepositional phrase.

Here is a more complicated example of elegant prose from the philosopher Michael J. Sandel. It follows our principles as well, but more subtly:

When moral reflection turns political, when it asks what laws should govern our collective life, it needs some engagement with the tumult of the city, with the arguments and incidents that roil the public mind. Debates over bailouts and price gouging, income inequality and affirmative action, military service and same-sex marriage, are the stuff of political philosophy. They prompt us to articulate and

justify our moral and political convictions, not only among family and friends but also in the demanding company of our fellow citizens.

—Justice: *What's the Right Thing to Do?*

- The first sentence delays the subject with a pair of subordinate *when* clauses, but that's a stylistic choice. The sentence still announces the passage's main topic/character *moral reflection* at its beginning, and the first *when* clause is slightly shorter than the second, creating a sense of proportion. When we do get to the main clause, we find that main character as the subject—it [*moral reflection*—and an action as the verb: *needs* (Sandel could have written *it is in need of...*). We also get quickly past the subject and verb to the direct object, *engagement*, which sets up the parallel *with* phrases that follow.
- Following the principle of old before new, the second sentence begins with a subject/topic—*Debates*—that names in a single word the concept introduced at the end of the first sentence. The sentence, with its sixteen-word whole subject *Debates... marriage* and short, five-word complement *the stuff of political philosophy* seems to depart from the principle of short before long. But that's a set-up: the concluding prepositional phrase *of moral philosophy* (*of* + weighty word) gives the sentence's end a satisfying heft: the alternative *moral philosophy's stuff* sounds flat.
- The third sentence adheres to our principles more strictly. It repeats the subject/topic/character of the second sentence (characters as subjects, old before new) and gets quickly past the verb, which expresses the action performed by that character (actions as verbs), to the object. In fact, all of that happens in just three words, which gets us quickly to the lengthy infinitive phrase *to articulate... fellow citizens* that makes up the bulk of the sentence. And within that phrase, the two-syllable word *moral* is balanced by the longer four-syllable word *political*, and the four-word prepositional phrase *among family and friends* is balanced by the longer eight-word prepositional phrase *in the demanding company of our fellow citizens*. The principle of short before long organizes this sentence at every level: the whole, the phrase, and the word.

Again, we can't tell you directly how to write an elegant sentence. Instead, we have shown you some ways that capable writers apply and combine the basic principles of clear and coherent writing to achieve the effect of elegance. To write elegantly yourself, you must read those who write elegantly and, through that apprenticeship, develop an elegant style of your own. Only then can you look at your own writing and know when it is elegant or just inflated. To make that distinction, the only truly reliable rule is that *less is more*, for, in the words of the poet Marianne Moore, "compression is the first grace of style."

## Exercise 10.4 In Your Own Words

You develop a knack for balance by imitating models—not word for word, just their general pattern. Pick some nicely balanced passages you admire, perhaps from sermons, political speeches, or dictionaries of quotations, and try imitating them. Choose a subject of your own, and follow your model's outline, as this writer did with this passage from the historian Frederick Jackson Turner:

- Survival in the wilderness requires the energy and wit to overcome the brute facts of an uncooperative Nature but rewards the person who acquires that power with the satisfaction of having done it once and with the confidence of being able to do it again.
- Life as a college student offers a few years of intellectual excitement but imposes a sense of anxiety on those who look ahead and know that its end is in sight.

You can also imitate examples from this lesson.

## Exercise 10.5 In Your Own Words

Congratulations! You have made it through ten lessons on clarity and grace. This exercise is an opportunity for you to see how far you've come. Give a reader two 500-word passages of your writing, one completed before you started working through this book and another you have completed more recently. Can your reader tell which is which? What specific changes have you made in your writing style? Use the principles from this book to describe the differences between your old and new writing.

## Summing Up

The qualities of elegance are too varied and subtle to capture in a summary. Nevertheless, elegant passages typically have three characteristics that may seem incompatible but are not:

1. the simplicity of characters as subjects and actions as verbs
2. the complexity of balanced syntax, meaning, sound, and rhythm
3. the emphasis of artfully stressed endings

In short, the effect of elegance follows from the principles of clarity and coherence, deftly applied and adapted.



*This page is intentionally left blank*

## PART FIVE

---

# Ethics

*Ethics is in origin the art of recommending to others the  
sacrifices required for cooperation with oneself.*

—BERTRAND RUSSELL

# Lesson 11

## The Ethics of Clarity

*Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

A running theme in our lessons has been that writers owe it to their readers to write clearly. But some ideas are inherently complex and must be expressed in complex language. It would be impossible, for example, for an engineer to revise this into language clear to everyone:

The drag force on a particle of diameter  $d$  moving with speed  $u$  relative to a fluid of density  $\rho$  and viscosity  $\mu$  is usually modeled by  $F = 0.5C_D\rho u^2A$ , where  $A$  is the cross-sectional area of the particle at right angles to the motion.

A principle to follow is Einstein's maxim about simplicity, applied to writing: it is good to make your writing as clear as possible, but you shouldn't "dumb down" your ideas just so you can express them more clearly. Of course, sometimes we must slow down to help readers who are new to a field—a chemistry textbook for students can't be written in the same style as a research report intended for other expert researchers—but that's a different matter.

Usually, though, the problem is not that a piece of writing is too clear but that it is unnecessarily complex, either because its writer couldn't do better or because that complexity benefits the writer in some way, even at a reader's expense. At that point, clarity becomes not just a technical issue but a matter of ethics.

### The Responsibilities of Writers and Readers

If writers have a responsibility to their readers, readers have a reciprocal responsibility to writers: to read carefully enough to understand ideas too difficult for very simple sentences. Most of us do work hard to understand what we read—at least until we decide that a writer failed to work equally hard to help us understand or, worse, deliberately made our reading more difficult than it had to be. Once we decide that a writer is careless, lazy, or self-indulgent—well, our days are too few to spend them in such company.

In fact, our reactions as readers imply our responsibility as writers: if we don't want others to impose gratuitously difficult writing on us, then we ought

not impose it on others. We should strive for a style that is no simpler than our ideas require but also no more difficult than it has to be.

This ideal is an ethical one and can be expressed in what we'll call the "golden rule" of style:

Write to others as you would have others write to you.

We write most ethically when we would trade places with our intended readers and experience the consequences they do after they read our writing. Unfortunately, writers don't or can't always live up to that altruistic ideal. Some simply fall short; some give precedence to other values; some by choice or obligation favor other interests over those of their readers. It is up to us as readers to distinguish these circumstances and then to make ethical judgments.

## Clarity and Other Values

How should we judge writers who violate the golden rule of style because they favor some other value over their readers' interests? We began our first lesson by saying that correctness is an important good but not the highest one. We ended that lesson by showing you how to write in a gender-inclusive fashion while still writing "correctly" (see pp. 16–21). The issue is one of competing values. Here are three instances for you to consider.

Is it unethical for writers to persist in using gendered nouns such as *comedienne* or *policeman* when gender-inclusive alternatives such as *comic* or *police officer* are ready at hand? We could say that it is. By deliberately choosing *not* to use these alternatives, such writers risk violating our golden rule, for it is certainly plausible that some writers would object to having *their* genders gratuitously noted or ignored if they were in their readers' shoes. And it is hard to imagine what other value or commitment is at stake, other than a nostalgia for traditional gender roles.

This case is slightly more complicated: what about writers who avoid using *they* with indefinite referents out of an allegiance to "correct" usage?

**Anyone** who wants a driver's license must have **their** eyes examined.

**Anyone** who wants a driver's license must have **his** eyes examined.

The first of those sentences is technically incorrect, at least in formal writing, but is the second unethical? It is easy to imagine it irritating some readers. Does the writer's allegiance to strict grammatical correctness override our golden rule of style?

The sentences in that last example are general ones: addressed to no one in particular, they merely state a requirement that applies to all. But what about sentences that concern specific individuals who identify as non-binary? Here again is the example we used in Lesson 1:

- ✓ Casey informed **their** teacher that **they** preferred neither of the traditional third-person singular pronouns.

Casey identifies as neither male nor female and wants to be referred to with the alternative pronoun *they*. Is it ethical for a writer who knows that preference to insist on referring to Casey using *she* or *he*? We would say no. It is increasingly hard to plead correctness, since the style guides on which such appeals must rely themselves increasingly accept the non-binary *they*. And were the writer in Casey's position, that writer would surely want Casey to respect their (is that correct?) preference. Now, what of a writer who does not actually know but merely infers Casey's pronoun preference but ends up getting it wrong? Has that writer acted unethically? And does Casey have a responsibility to correct that false inference?

We'll look at several examples to explore these sorts of ethical issues, including in Lesson 12 one of the most celebrated speeches in American history, Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address.

## Clarity and Competing Interests

Let's turn from the question of competing values to that of competing interests. On many occasions, writers' interests align with those of their readers, but often they do not. Does the golden rule of style obligate writers to place their readers' interests over their own? It is obviously unethical for writers to lie to their readers to get them to act against their interests. But what of omissions? Must an investment broker inform a client of her hefty commissions on the financial products she touts? Most would say yes. But must the author of a college admissions brochure inform her readers that there is a better and cheaper institution just down the road? Most would say no. Why the difference? (That's not just a rhetorical question.)

Now, what of writers who, without lying and without omitting important information, make choices of style that steer readers, perhaps even without them knowing it, to act in ways they otherwise would not? If our readers decide that we're unfairly manipulating them or even that our writing is unnecessarily difficult, we risk losing more than their attention. We also risk losing what writers since Aristotle have called a reliable *ethos*—the character that readers infer from our writing. Do we seem sympathetic or callous? Trustworthy or deceitful? Amiably candid or impersonally aloof? Over time, the *ethos* you project in individual pieces of writing hardens into your reputation.

So writing clearly benefits not just readers but also writers, for readers tend to trust most—and to believe most readily—those writers who have earned reputations for being thoughtful, responsible, and considerate of readers' needs. But what of writers who are representing the interests of an employer? Or writers who are working collaboratively? Or writers who are anonymous? In fact, much of what we read doesn't have an identifiable author at all, so in those instances no individual's *ethos* is at stake. Does that change the ethics of the situation?

## Unintended Obscurity

Those who write in ways that seem dense and convoluted rarely intend to do so. It is unlikely that the writers of this next passage *knowingly* wrote it as unclearly as they did:

A major condition affecting adult reliance on early communicative patterns is the extent to which the communication has been planned prior to its delivery. We find that adult speech behaviour takes on many of the characteristics of child language, where the communication is spontaneous and relatively unpredictable.

—E. Ochs and B. Schieffelin, *Planned and Unplanned Discourse*

That means (we think):

When we speak spontaneously, we rely on patterns of child language.

The authors might object that our paraphrase oversimplifies their idea, but those eleven words express what we take from their forty-seven. And what really counts, after all, is not what writers think they have put into a passage but what readers get out of it.

The ethical issue here is not those writers' willful indifference but their innocent ignorance. We can help such writers by reading carefully and charitably. And if we have the opportunity, we can help them by telling them candidly how their writing affects us—and why. We know many of you right now think you do not have the standing to do that. But one day you will.

## Intended Misdirection

Not all obscurity is unintentional: it can arise also when writers knowingly put other interests over those of their readers. We might take a hard line and condemn writers who adopt anything but the most straightforward style. But not all indirectness is unethical. When a supervisor says *I'm afraid our new funding didn't come through*, we know it means *You have lost your job*. That indirectness is motivated not by dishonesty but by kindness, and few would condemn the supervisor for it. But what about cases in which such stylistic misdirection reflects not writers' compassion but a genuine difference between their interests and those of their readers? These examples challenge you to consider that important question.

**Who Erred?** A major automotive repair company was once accused of overcharging its customers. It responded with this notice:

With over two million automotive customers serviced last year in California alone, mistakes may have occurred. However, we want you to know that we would never intentionally violate the trust customers have shown in our company for more than 100 years.

In the first sentence, the writer avoided identifying the company as the party responsible for mistakes. The writer could have used a passive verb:

...mistakes **may have been made**.

But that passive would have encouraged us to wonder *By whom?* Instead, the writer found an active verb that moved the company off stage by suggesting that mistakes just *occurred*, seemingly on their own.

In the second sentence, though, the writer used the first-person *we* to humanize the company, the responsible agent, and emphasize its good intentions:

|    **we**...would never intentionally violate...

If we revise the first sentence to focus on the company and the second to hide it, we get a very different effect:

|    When we serviced over two million automotive customers last year in California, we made mistakes. However, you should know that no intentional violation of more than 100 years of trust occurred.

That's a small point of stylistic manipulation, self-interested but innocent of any malign motives. This next one is more significant.

**Who Pays?** Consider this letter from a natural gas utility telling hundreds of thousands of customers that it was raising their rates. (The subject/topic in every clause, main or subordinate, is boldfaced.)

|    **The State Utilities Commission** has authorized a restructuring of our rates together with an increase in service charge revenues effective at the start of the next calendar year. **This** is the first increase in our rates in over six years. **The restructuring of rates** is consistent with revised state policy that **rates for service to various classes of utility customers** be based upon the cost of providing that service. **The new rates** move revenues from every class of customer closer to the cost actually incurred to provide gas service.

That notice is a model of misdirection: after the first sentence, the writer never again begins a sentence with a human character, least of all the character whose interests are most at stake—the reader. The reader is mentioned only twice, in the third person, and never as a subject/topic/agent:

|    ...for service to various classes of utility **customers**  
|    ...move revenues from every class of **customer**

The anonymous writer of that notice refers to the gas company only twice, in the phrase *our rates*, and never identifies the company as a responsible subject/topic/agent. Had the company wanted to make clear who the real “doer” was and who was being done to, the notice would have read more like this:

|    According to the State Utilities Commission, **we** can now make **you** pay more for your gas service after the new year. **We** have not made **you** pay more in over six years, but under revised state policy, now **we** can.

We can reasonably charge those writers with breaching the golden rule of style: the deflection of responsibility seems deliberate, and they surely would not want that same kind of writing directed to them in a matter of personal interest.

But is this notice really that bad? It is not untrue, and despite its misdirection, it is not trying to dupe customers into doing anything against their interests. We might wish that utility company had been more straightforward about its decision to raise its rates, but either way, we're still required to pay them.

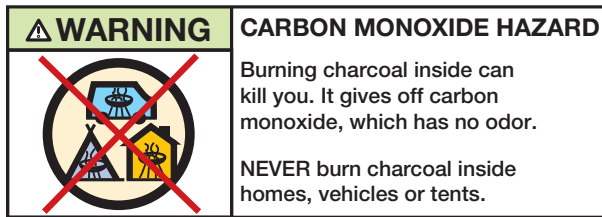
This example suggests another standard, what we'll call the "silver rule" of an ethical style:

*Do not* write to others as you would *not* have others write to you.

The golden rule of style is a principle of empathy: it challenges writers to hold their readers' interests at least equal to their own and to write with their readers' interests in mind; the silver rule is a principle of fairness: it allows writers to pursue their own interests even at a cost to their readers, so long as they do not willfully deceive or cause gratuitous harm. That notice violates our golden rule, but it meets the lesser standard of the silver rule.

The golden rule of style expresses an ideal to which writers should aspire; the silver rule of style defines what all readers should at least be able to expect. It is still a high standard, and when writers violate it, they abrade the trust that sustains a civil society.

**Who Dies?** Finally, here are two passages that concern life and death. This label from the Consumer Product Safety Commission appears on bags of charcoal:



That label is a model of clarity in the service of its readers. The first sentence's subject/topic is *your* potential action, *burning charcoal inside*, and its predicate emphasizes that action's potentially dire effect on the label's main character: *you*. The label delivers the most important piece of information—the fact that you might die—first, saving the cause for a second sentence. The imperative third sentence reinforces the message of the first two by reiterating it as a precept or command. Don't be fooled by that label's simplicity: its directness is not inevitable but the result of deliberate choices. The label could have read something like this:

Charcoal when burned gives off carbon monoxide, which has no odor. Burning charcoal inside homes, vehicles, or tents can cause death.



This version is just as clear as the original, but it tells the wrong story. It focuses not on *you* (who are hidden as the implied subject of the past participle *burned* and in the nominalization *death*) but on *charcoal* and what happens to it when it burns. It only incidentally acknowledges what you the reader most care about: that you might die as a consequence of your actions.

Not all product warnings serve their readers so well as that charcoal warning label. Consider vehicle recall notices. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, almost a third of car owners who receive them do not get their cars fixed. Among the reasons are these: that car owners cannot understand the notices they receive or are not sufficiently alarmed by them to bring their cars to the dealer for service.

Here is one such notice, which shows how writers can meet a legal obligation while evading an ethical one:

<sup>1</sup>A defect which involves the possible failure of a frame support plate may exist on your vehicle. <sup>2</sup>This plate (front suspension pivot bar support plate) connects a portion of the front suspension to the vehicle frame, and <sup>3</sup>its failure could affect vehicle directional control, particularly during heavy brake application. <sup>4</sup>In addition, your vehicle may require adjustment service to the hood secondary catch system. <sup>5</sup>The secondary catch may be misaligned so that the hood may not be adequately restrained to prevent hood fly-up in the event the primary latch is inadvertently left unengaged. <sup>6</sup>Sudden hood fly-up beyond the secondary catch while driving could impair driver visibility. <sup>7</sup>In certain circumstances, occurrence of either of the above conditions could result in vehicle crash without prior warning.

Imagine that you have received this letter, and think about how you are being manipulated to respond. First, look at the subjects/topics of the sentences:

<sup>1</sup> a defect	<sup>2</sup> this plate	<sup>3</sup> its failure
<sup>4</sup> your vehicle	<sup>5</sup> the secondary catch	
<sup>6</sup> sudden hood fly-up	<sup>7</sup> occurrence of either condition	

The main character/topic of that story is not *you*, the driver, but your car and its parts. In fact, the writers—probably a team of lawyers with help from some engineers—ignored you almost entirely (you are in *your vehicle* twice and *driver* once) and omitted all references to themselves. In sum, that notice says:

There is a car that might have defective parts. Its frame support plate could fail, and its hood secondary catch system may not keep the hood from flying up. If either of those things happens, the car could crash without warning.

The writers also nominalized important actions (gold) and used passive verbs (pink) when they referred to actions that might alarm you:

<sup>1</sup>A defect which involves the possible **failure** of a frame support plate may exist on your vehicle. <sup>2</sup>This plate (front suspension pivot bar support plate) connects a

portion of the front suspension to the vehicle frame, and <sup>3</sup>its failure could affect vehicle directional **control**, particularly during heavy brake **application**. <sup>4</sup>In addition, your vehicle may require adjustment service to the hood secondary catch system. <sup>5</sup>The secondary catch may **be misaligned** so that the hood may not **be** adequately **restrained** to prevent hood **fly-up** in the event the primary latch **is** inadvertently **left** unengaged. <sup>6</sup>Sudden hood fly-up beyond the secondary catch while driving could impair driver **visibility**. <sup>7</sup>In certain circumstances, occurrence of either of the above conditions could result in vehicle crash without prior **warning**.

If these choices of style were intentional, then that recall notice surely violates our highest standard, for no one would swap places with a reader deliberately lulled into ignoring a dangerous, even life-threatening situation. But does the notice violate our lesser standard, which allows some indirectness but still requires that writers deal fairly with their readers and certainly precludes callous indifference to their fate? In this case, the misdirection seems so deliberate and the consequences for the reader are so significant that we could say that it does.

## Exercise 11.1

Look again at both versions of that gas rate notice, the original and our revision using *we* and *you*:

**The State Utilities Commission** has authorized a restructuring of our rates together with an increase in service charge revenues effective at the start of the next calendar year ...

According to the State Utilities Commission, **we** can now make **you** pay more for your gas service after the new year ...

We noted that the revision is more direct, but we also suggested that the original might not be unethical. Is that original “good” writing? What do you mean by *good*?

## Exercise 11.2

Revise the recall letter, making *you* the subject of as many verbs as you can and naming as many actions in verbs as you can. One of the sentences will read,

If you **brake** hard and the plate **fails**, you could ...

Would the company be reluctant to send out that version? Which of the following, if either, is closer to the “truth”? Is that even the right question?

If the plate fails, you could crash.

If the plate fails, your car could crash.

## Rationalizing Opacity

Some writers, believe it or not, are skeptical of clarity. How should we respond to those who know they write in a complex style but claim they must because they are breaking new intellectual ground, or those who frame clear writing itself as a disservice to readers? Are they right, or are these self-serving rationalizations? These are vexing questions that can be settled only case by case—and even then not to everyone’s satisfaction.

## Necessary Complexity

Here, for example, is a sentence from a leading figure in contemporary literary theory:

If, for a while, the ruse of desire is calculable for the uses of discipline soon the repetition of guilt, justification, pseudo-scientific theories, superstition, spurious authorities, and classifications can be seen as the desperate effort to “normalize” *formally* the disturbance of a discourse of splitting that violates the rational, enlightened claims of its enunciatory modality.

—Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”

Does that sentence express a thought so subtle and complex that its substance can be expressed only as written? Or is it academic babble? How do we decide whether in fact his nuances are, at least for ordinarily competent readers, just not accessible given the time most of us have for figuring them out?

We owe our readers precise and nuanced prose, but we ought not to assume that they owe us an inordinate amount of their time to unpack it. If we deliberately write in ways that we know will make readers struggle—well, that’s a gambit we choose to play. In the marketplace of ideas, truth is the prime value but not the only one. Another is what it costs us to find it.

The fact is, when writers claim their prose style must be difficult because their ideas are so complex or new, they are more often wrong than right. The philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein said:

Whatever can be thought can be thought clearly; whatever can be written can be written clearly.

We’ll add a nuance:

...and with just a bit more effort, more clearly still.

## Salutary Complexity/Subversive Clarity

There are two more defenses of complexity: one is that complexity is good for us, the other is that clarity is bad.

As to the first claim, some argue that the harder we have to work to grasp what we read, the more deeply we think and the better we understand. Everyone

should be happy to know that no evidence supports so foolish a claim, and substantial evidence contradicts it.

As to the second claim, some argue that clarity is a device wielded by those in power to mislead us about who really controls our lives. By speaking and writing in deceptively simple ways, the argument goes, those who control the facts dumb them down, rendering us unable to understand the full complexity of our social and political circumstances:

It seems to us that those...who make a call for clear writing synonymous with an attack on critical educators have missed the role that the “language of clarity” plays in a dominant culture that cleverly and powerfully uses “clear” and “simplistic” language to systematically undermine and prevent the conditions from arising for a public culture to engage in rudimentary forms of complex and critical thinking.

—Stanley Aronowitz, *Postmodern Education*

This writer makes one good point: language is deeply implicated in politics, ideology, and control. In our earliest history, the educated elite used writing itself to exclude the illiterate, then Latin and French to exclude those who knew only English. More recently, those in authority have relied on a vocabulary thick with Latinate nominalizations and on a Standard English that requires those Outs aspiring to join the Ins to submit to a decades-long education, during which time they are expected to acquire not only the language of the Ins but their values as well.

So is clarity an ideological value? Of course it is. How could it not be? But those who attack clarity as a conspiracy to oversimplify complicated social issues are as wrong as those who attack science because some use it for destructive ends: it is not clarity that subverts but the unethical use of it. Clarity is a value that is created by society and that society must work hard to maintain. We must simply insist that, in principle, those who manage our affairs have a duty to tell us the truth as clearly as they can. They probably won’t, but that just shifts the burden to us to call them out on it.

## Here’s the Point

Style depends on choices, and the ethical quality of those choices depends on the motives behind them. Only by knowing those motives can we know whether a writer would willingly subject herself to her own prose, to be influenced (or manipulated) by it as her readers are. We can’t always pass ethical judgment on others, but we can certainly write ethically ourselves. Remember the golden rule of ethical writing: *Write to others as you would have others write to you.*

## Exercise 11.3 In Your Own Words

The golden rule of style is to write to others as you would have them write to you. It asks you to put yourself in your readers' shoes. Recall an occasion when you violated this principle or were tempted to. What was the situation? What did you do? Was the violation justified? Would you do anything differently now? The silver rule of style is to not write to others as you would not have them write to you. It asks you to be fair. Recall an occasion when you violated this principle or were tempted to. What was the situation? What did you do? Would you do anything differently now?

## Exercise 11.4

We confront ethical issues in writing every day. For one week, pay attention to the writing you encounter in your everyday life: labels on products, the fine print on bills, bulk mail advertisements, spam in your email account, and so on. Select three examples that raise ethical issues you would like to talk about, and share them with a colleague or with your class. What ethical issues do they raise? Why do you imagine their writers wrote them as they did? How would those examples need to be revised to make them ethical?

## Summing Up

Writers and readers have reciprocal obligations: in general, writers should write as clearly as possible without distorting or over-simplifying their meaning, and readers should make a good-faith effort to understand difficult writing, because its ideas may be too complex for simple sentences. This relationship is a matter of trust, which makes it a matter of ethics.

However, not everything is written as clearly as it could be. Sometimes writers have done their best and fallen short, but sometimes they are intentionally unclear. Here are two ethical principles you can follow as a writer or apply as a reader when judging the writing of others:

**The Golden Rule of Style:** Write to others as you would have others write to you.

This rule is based on empathy: it asks writers to put themselves in the position of their readers and to evaluate their writing from that perspective. It is an ideal to which ethical writers aspire.

**The Silver Rule of Style:** Do not write to others as you would not have others write to you.

This rule is based on fairness: it acknowledges that the interests of writers and readers may not always align, but it requires that writers not treat readers unfairly, callously, or deceptively. Ethical writers can be expected to follow at least this rule.

# Lesson 12

## Beyond Clarity

*Style is the ultimate morality of mind.*  
—ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

Style, we have emphasized, is a matter of choice, and throughout our lessons we have urged you to make choices in the service of your readers, choices that will help them understand your ideas without imposing unnecessary burdens upon them. But more is at stake in style than clarity. Consider these sentences:

Students plagiarize most frequently in large classes in which they have little contact with their teachers.

Plagiarism occurs most frequently in large classes that allow for little student-teacher contact.

Both sentences are clear, and they have similar meanings. But they are informed by different philosophies of human action. Look at the subjects and verbs. That first sentence, by taking the human character *students* as its subject and pairing it with a specific verb, *plagiarize*, treats plagiarism as a deliberate action: large classes give students the opportunity to plagiarize, and some students choose to do so. That second sentence, by taking the nominalization *plagiarism* as its subject and deliberately muting the presence of human beings in the sentence (they appear only in the modifier *student-teacher* at the sentence's end), treats plagiarism as a social phenomenon, as something that just *occurs* under certain conditions.

The point is this: style is not just a matter of craft, of tidying up our sentences after the more serious work of thinking and writing is over. It also raises thorny philosophical questions—*Are individuals responsible for their actions? Can my writing accurately and adequately convey my thoughts to another?*—and involves choices that are not just technical but also ethical. In our last lesson, we considered the ethics of clarity through several short cases. This lesson raises the stakes through an extended analysis of Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, which in its style negotiates ethical questions far more profound than a mere conflict of interests between individual writers and readers. It shows just how complex and consequential matters of style can become.

## Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address is among the most celebrated political texts in any language. Lincoln delivered it in March 1865, just before the end of the American Civil War. He knew the North would win, but he feared that the North would punish the South for both the enormity of slavery and the carnage of the war. As history has shown, he was right to worry. In his address, Lincoln therefore tried to reconcile the North and the South in words engraved not only on the wall of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. but in America's national memory:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

We have, however, not committed to memory his opening sentences, because we are stirred by neither the elegance of their language nor the loftiness of their thought:

Fellow Countrymen:

At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention, and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

If that paragraph were anonymous, its stiff impersonality might lead us to judge it as pedestrian. The thing to recognize is that its style is a choice. Lincoln could have written something like this:

As I appear here for the second time to take the oath of the presidential office, I have less occasion to address you at length than I did at the first. Then I thought it was fitting and proper that I state in detail the course to be pursued ...

That recalls the direct, first-person style he adopted in his First Inaugural Address:

Fellow citizens of the United States:

In compliance with a custom as old as the government itself, I appear before you to address you briefly, and to take, in your presence, the oath prescribed by the Constitution... I do not consider it necessary, at present, for me to discuss...

Or he could have written this:

Fellow Countrymen:

As we meet for this second taking of the oath of the presidential office, we have less need for an extended address than we had at the first. Then we felt a statement, describing in detail, the course we would pursue would be fitting and proper...

And that is close to the Gettysburg Address:

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field...

So we must ask: Why would an accomplished stylist like Lincoln, a stylist known for his honesty, clarity, and directness, choose to begin his address with such an abstract and indirect style?

In that first paragraph, the topics of Lincoln's sentences (underlined) deflect our attention from the participants and focus it on the event and Lincoln's message:

this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is  
a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting  
public declarations have been constantly called forth  
little that is new could be presented  
The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is  
no prediction in regard to it is ventured

What is the purpose of this impersonal style? We might understand if we look at the body of his address, in which Lincoln skillfully manages the attribution of responsibility for the war and what would be its aftermath. Here are the two paragraphs between Lincoln's wooden introduction and his luminous conclusion. As you read, notice his subjects/topics (underlined) and whether or not they have human characters (gold) in them (italics are Lincoln's):

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it—all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to *saving* the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to *destroy* it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish. And the war came.



One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war; while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."

The opening sentence of Lincoln's second paragraph, which takes a nominalization as its subject and then follows it with a passive verb, is conspicuously impersonal: *all thoughts were ... directed*. Who thought? Who directed? Then for two short sentences, Lincoln switches to the direct style we expect from him, a style in which subjects are concrete human characters:

| All dreaded it—all sought to avert it.

In the next sentence, he adopts the impersonal passive again:

| While the inaugural address was being delivered ...

Then he returns for several sentences to a direct style, in which human characters are subjects and their actions are verbs (note, however, that the subjects are general, not specific):

| insurgent agents were in the city seeking to *destroy* it

| Both parties deprecated war

| one of them would *make* war

But then:

| And the war came.

How can a war just *come*? This sentence presents the war not as a consequence of deliberate human action—and therefore something for which someone must be made to take responsibility—but as a phenomenon without explicit cause.

Lincoln then gives us an awkward sentence about slavery:

| One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it.

Through his indirectness, Lincoln holds slavery at a distance. He could have been more direct:

| Slaves were one eighth of the population, localized in the South.

He does the same in his next two sentences, which begin clearly but then also slip into abstraction:

| These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war.

Lincoln could have written *All knew that slavery caused the war*, but even that nominalization *slavery* is too concrete, so he euphemizes it as an *interest*.

Most of what follows is written in the direct style we associate with Lincoln, but notice how he continues to refer to slavery indirectly (references to slavery in italics):

| To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend *this interest* was the object  
the insurgents would rend the Union  
the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict *the territorial enlargement of it*.  
 Neither party expected  
Neither anticipated  
*the cause of the conflict* might cease  
the conflict itself should cease.

How can slavery or the war just *cease*? The absence of agency and therefore responsibility is palpable.

At this point, Lincoln's style quickens through a series of short clauses that introduce God as a character, not yet as an active agent but as a passive object of prayers and requests (references to God in italics):

| Each looked for an easier triumph  
Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same *God*

each invokes *His* aid against the other

It may seem

any men should dare to ask a *just God's assistance*

but let us judge not

Then in three passive clauses, Lincoln suggests that God can act but has not yet acted as either side has prayed:

that we be not judged [by *God*]

The prayers of both could not be answered [by *God*]

that of neither has been answered fully [by *God*]

Having thus gradually introduced God as a character, Lincoln repeatedly uses the subjects (underlined) of clauses to name God (gold) as a purposeful agent who *has, wills, and gives* and to name us (pink) as thinking, feeling, moral beings who *suppose, discern, ascribe, hope, and pray*:

The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."

The style is clear and direct—with the striking exception of that exceedingly complex seventy-eight word second sentence *If ... Him?* We must parse a fifty-seven word subordinate clause—*If ... came*—before we get to the main subject and verb, *shall we discern*. In that subordinate clause, Lincoln implies—but never states—that the North has no right to punish the South for the war or to take credit for ending it or ending slavery: it is all God's doing.

But before making God responsible, Lincoln delivers a powerful even shocking statement on the origin of slavery. The statement is this:

American slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove ...

What distinguishes this statement is the way Lincoln uses nominalizations—*slavery, offences, providence*—to avoid stating his claim directly. Turning those nominalizations into verbs, we get something like this:

God provided that Americans would enslave Africans. This offended God. God now wills that it end.

Lincoln obscures that claim in two other ways as well. He presents it not as a main clause but as a nominal *that* clause (boldfaced) serving as a direct object of the verb *suppose*:

we shall suppose **that American Slavery is ...**

And he positions that sentence as a subordinate clause (*italics*) beginning with the subordinating conjunction *if*:

*If we shall suppose* that American Slavery is ...

Lincoln takes such pains to mask his claim in a grammatical haze that we might reasonably conclude that he wished to avoid its disturbing theological implications. To be sure, Lincoln believed that God had ordained every terrible thing that happened to both the North and the South. He has no problem saying clearly that God *gave* the war to both sides, that God *willed* the end of slavery (as opposed to it just *ceasing*, as he put it earlier), and that despite our hopes and prayers God might will it to continue. Yet Lincoln seems unwilling to attribute the origin of slavery to God, perhaps because he personally regarded slavery as a profound evil. In a letter to the Kentuckian Albert Hodges, editor of the *Frankfort Commonwealth*, written less than a year before the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln states unequivocally, "If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I can not remember when I did not so think, and feel." In that same letter, however, he also affirms his public duty to uphold the Constitution and, even more, to preserve the nation.

In his address, Lincoln accomplishes a difficult feat of argument and style. For the good of the nation, Lincoln preempts the North's right to moral superiority or revenge by making God the ultimate agent of the Civil War, the agent who may will it to cease or will it to continue as just punishment. In fact, the only time he refers to North or South by name, he makes them the object of God's wrath: *He gives to North and South, this terrible war*. Lincoln also subordinates, without denying, his personal sense of slavery's great wrong to his public duty to the union.

He then delivers the climactic ending we remember:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

It is a great speech, especially in its last words. Now recall the concern that motivated our analysis: What are we to make of Lincoln's stylistic sleight of hand

throughout his address, especially of the extreme complexity of that sentence on American slavery? Is Lincoln unethical because, in eroding his audience's claims to moral superiority and revenge, he pushes them to act against their perceived interests? Given the import of the matters with which Lincoln is dealing and his focus on the collective good of *all*, we must say no. If his address is less clear in places than it could have been, that is because Lincoln is modulating his style in the service of a more profound good.

## Exercise 12.1

Look back at that automobile recall letter from Lesson 11. That letter seems crafted to lull its readers into failing to act in their own life-or-death interest. In the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln distances God from slavery as deliberately as that letter distances a manufacturer from a defective product. What kinds of ethical distinctions would you make between that letter and Lincoln's address?

## Summing Up

How, finally, do we decide what counts as “good” writing? Is it writing that is clear, graceful, and candid, even if it fails to achieve its end? Or is it writing that does a job, regardless of its integrity and means? We have a problem so long as *good* can mean either ethically sound or pragmatically successful. Our golden rule of style gives us a sure-fire way to resolve that dilemma: we are certainly ethical writers when we would willingly put ourselves in the place of our readers and experience what they do as they read what we've written. That rule puts the burden on us not only to imagine our readers and their feelings but also to act in their best interest. Sometimes, though, a writer's interests will not align with those of readers. In those instances, our silver rule of style still demands that you be fair to your readers: you need not favor your readers' interests over your own in everything you write—few of us are that saintly—but you cannot deceive, either by outright lying or through gross obfuscation or omission.

If you are even moderately advanced in your academic or professional career, you've experienced the consequences of unclear writing. If you are in your early years of college, though, you may wonder whether all this talk about clarity, ethics, and *ethos* is just so much finger-wagging. At this moment, you may be happy enough to find words to fill three pages, without worrying about their style. And you may be reading textbooks that have been heavily edited to make them clear to first-year students who know little or nothing about their content. So you may not yet have experienced much carelessly dense writing. But it's only a matter of time before you will.

Others wonder why they should struggle to learn to write clearly when bad writing seems so common and appears to cost its writers so little. What

experienced readers know, and you eventually will, is that clear and graceful writers are so few that when we find them, we are desperately grateful. They do not go unrewarded.

We also know that for many writers, crafting a good sentence or paragraph is itself a pleasure. It is an ethical satisfaction some of us find not just in writing but in everything we do: we find joy in doing good work, no matter the job, no matter who notices. It is a view expressed with clarity and grace by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who identifies a “sense for style” in any art or endeavor as an aesthetic and, finally, moral appreciation for planned ends economically achieved:

The administrator with a sense for style hates waste; the engineer with a sense for style economizes his material; the artisan with a sense for style prefers good work. Style is the ultimate morality of mind.

—*The Aims of Education*

# Appendix I

## Punctuation

---

*There are some punctuations that are interesting  
and there are some punctuations that are not.*

—GERTRUDE STEIN

Most writers think that punctuation must obey the same kind of rules that govern grammar, and that managing commas and semicolons is like making verbs agree with subjects. In fact, the rules of punctuation are not *real* rules but *social* or *invented* rules (see Lesson 1), and they change not only from era to era but even in some cases from handbook to handbook and manual to manual. You have more options in how to punctuate than you might think, and if you choose thoughtfully, you can help readers not only understand a complex sentence more easily but create nuances of emphasis that they will notice.

We will address punctuation as a functional problem: How do we punctuate the end of a sentence, then its beginning, and finally its middle? But first, we have to distinguish different kinds of sentences.

### Simple, Compound, and Complex Sentences

Sentences have traditionally been called *simple*, *compound*, and *complex*. If a sentence has just one independent clause (that is, just one clause that could stand alone as its own sentence), it is *simple*:

| The greatest English dictionary is the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

If it has two or more independent clauses, it is *compound*:

| There are many good dictionaries, independent clause  
| but the greatest is the *Oxford English Dictionary*. independent clause

If it has an independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses, it is *complex*:

While there are many good dictionaries, subordinate clause  
the greatest is the *Oxford English Dictionary*. independent clause

If it has at least two independent clauses, and at least one of them includes a subordinate clause, it is *compound-complex*.

These terms are potentially misleading, however, because they suggest that a grammatically simple sentence should also *feel* simpler than one that is grammatically complex. But that's not always true. For example, to most readers of the next two sentences, the grammatically simple one *feels* more complex than the grammatically complex one:

<b>Grammatically simple:</b>	Our review of the test led to our modification of it as a result of complaints by teachers.
<b>Grammatically complex:</b>	After we reviewed the test, we modified it because teachers complained.

We need another set of terms that more reliably indicate how readers are likely to respond to such sentences.

## Punctuated and Grammatical Sentences

We can make a more useful distinction between what we will call *punctuated* sentences and *grammatical* sentences:

- A punctuated sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a period, question mark, or exclamation point. It might be one word or more than a hundred.
- A grammatical sentence is a subject and verb in a main clause along with everything else depending on that clause.

We distinguish these two kinds of sentence because readers respond to them very differently: the paragraph you are now reading is one long punctuated sentence, but it is not as difficult to read as many paragraphs made up of shorter sentences with multiple subordinate clauses; we have chosen to punctuate as one long sentence what might have been punctuated as a series of shorter ones: that semicolon, those colons, and the comma before *but*, for example, could have been periods—and that dash could have been a period too.

Here is that long sentence you just read revised and repunctuated with virtually no change in its grammar, creating seven punctuated sentences:

We distinguish these two kinds of sentence because readers respond to them very differently. The paragraph you are now reading is made up of short punctuated



sentences. But it is not less difficult to read than many paragraphs made up of longer sentences with multiple independent clauses. We have chosen to punctuate as a series of separate sentences what might have been punctuated as one long one. The period before *but*, for example, could have been a comma. The last two periods could have been semicolons. And that period could have been a dash.

Those seven grammatical sentences feel different when punctuated as seven punctuated sentences, though little else has changed. Like other aspects of style, punctuation is a matter less of following rules (although there are some) than of choosing among options: we create different effects through the choices we make.

## Punctuating the Ends of Sentences

Above all else, you must know how to punctuate the end of a grammatical sentence. You can signal the end of a grammatical sentence in a number of ways, but signal it you must, because readers have to know where one grammatical sentence stops and the next begins. You can choose to separate pairs of grammatical sentences in ten ways. Three are common.

### Three Common Forms of End Punctuation

In these examples, punctuation marks are in pink and conjunctions are boldfaced.

- 1. Period, Question Mark, or Exclamation Point Alone** The most common way to signal the end of a grammatical sentence is with a period:

✓ In 1967 Congress passed civil rights laws to remedy problems of registration and voting. These had political consequences throughout the South.

But if you create too many short punctuated sentences, your readers may feel your prose is choppy or simplistic. Experienced writers often revise very short grammatical sentences into subordinate clauses or even phrases, turning two or more grammatical sentences into one. Here, the subordinating conjunction *when* creates a subordinate clause (underlined) that appears before the subject of the main sentence:

✓ When in 1967 Congress passed civil rights laws to remedy problems of registration and voting, they had political consequences throughout the South.

Here the relative pronoun *that* makes a relative clause (underlined):

✓ The civil rights laws that Congress passed in 1967 to remedy problems of registration and voting had political consequences throughout the South.

Be cautious, though: if you combine too many short grammatical sentences into one long one, you may create a sentence that sprawls (see Lesson 9).

- 2. Semicolon Alone** A semicolon is like a soft period; whatever is on either side of it should be a grammatical sentence (with an exception we'll discuss on p. 194).

Use a semicolon instead of a period only when the first grammatical sentence has fewer than fifteen or so words and the content of the second grammatical sentence is closely linked to the first:

- ✓ In 1967 Congress passed civil rights laws that remedied problems of registration and voting; those laws had political consequences throughout the South.

Many writers avoid semicolons because they find them mildly intimidating. So learning their use might be worth your time, especially if you want to be judged a sophisticated writer. Once every couple of pages is probably about right.

- 3. Comma + Coordinating Conjunction** Readers are also ready to recognize the end of a grammatical sentence when they see a comma followed by two signals:
- a coordinating conjunction: *and, but, yet, for, so, or, nor*
  - another independent clause

- ✓ Technology companies need highly skilled workers, so they recruit aggressively at the best colleges and universities.

Here are some guidelines to help you choose among these three options. Use a period or semicolon if the two grammatical sentences are long and have their own internal punctuation. You can use commas to separate a series of three or more grammatical sentences, but only if they are short and have no internal punctuation:

- ✓ Baseball satisfies our admiration for precision; basketball speaks to our love of speed and grace; and football appeals to our lust for violence.

If any of the grammatical sentences have internal punctuation, separate them with semicolons:

- ✓ Baseball, an essentially rural sport that mimics the rhythms of agrarian time, satisfies our admiration for precision; basketball, our newest sport and now more urban than rural, speaks to our love of speed and grace; and football, a sport both rural and urban, appeals to our lust for violence.

Be careful not to overuse *and*. Readers want conjunctions to signal relationships among ideas, so too many grammatical sentences joined with *and* can feel simplistic.

Omit the comma, however, between a pair of short grammatical sentences if you introduce them with a modifier that applies to both of them:

- ✓ Once the financial crisis ended, the stock market rebounded, but unemployment persisted.

A caution: even skilled writers sometimes use a comma incorrectly to punctuate the end of a grammatical sentence when they begin the next with *however*. Not this:

Taxpayers have supported public education, however, they now object because taxes have risen so steeply.

Because *however* is not a coordinating conjunction, that first sentence requires a period or semicolon (but keep the comma after *however*):

- ✓ Taxpayers have supported public education. However, they now object because taxes have risen so steeply.
- ✓ Taxpayers have supported public education; however, they now object because taxes have risen so steeply.

## Four Less Common Forms of End Punctuation

Some readers have reservations about these next four ways of signaling the end of a grammatical sentence, but careful writers regularly use them.

**4. Period + Coordinating Conjunction** Some think that it's wrong to begin a punctuated sentence with a coordinating conjunction such as *and* or *but* (review p. 9). But they are wrong. The second sentence here is entirely correct:

- ✓ Education cannot guarantee freedom. And when it is available to only a few, it becomes a tool of social repression.

This technique, which adds a touch of informality, can lighten up a passage that feels too somber. In serious contexts, use it no more than once or twice a page, especially with *and*.

**5. Semicolon + Coordinating Conjunction** Writers occasionally end one grammatical sentence with a semicolon and begin the next with a coordinating conjunction.

A comma is better if the two grammatical sentences are short, like these:

- ✓ Technology companies need highly skilled workers; so they recruit aggressively at the best colleges and universities.

But readers can be grateful for a semicolon if the two grammatical sentences are long and have their own internal commas:

- ✓ Problem solving, one of the most active areas of psychology, has made great strides in the last decade, particularly in understanding the problem-solving strategies of experts; so it is no surprise that educators have followed that research with interest.

Then again, readers would probably prefer a period there even more.

**6. Conjunction Alone** Some writers signal a close link between short grammatical sentences with a coordinating conjunction alone, omitting the comma:

- ✓ Oscar Wilde violated a fundamental law of British society and we all know what happened to him.

But a warning: though writers of the best prose make this choice, some teachers consider it an error.

**7. Comma Alone** Readers rarely expect to see just a comma used to separate two grammatical sentences, but they can manage if the sentences are short and closely linked in meaning, such as *cause-effect*, *first-second*, or *if-then*:

- ✓ Act in haste, repent at leisure.

Be sure, though, that neither has internal commas. Not this:

Public-school teachers, who have long been underpaid, are no longer content with their situation, they are now demanding change.

A semicolon would be clearer:

- ✓ Public-school teachers, who have long been underpaid, are no longer content with their situation; they are now demanding change.

But the same warning: though writers of the best prose will separate short grammatical sentences with just a comma, many teachers disapprove. That's because a comma alone is traditionally condemned as a *comma splice*, in their view a grave error. So be sure of your readers before you experiment.

## Quick Tip

When you begin a grammatical sentence with *but*, you can either put a comma at the end of the previous sentence or begin a new punctuated sentence by using a period and capitalizing *but*. Use a period + *But* if what follows is important and you intend to go on discussing it:

- ✓ The immediate consequence of higher gas prices in the 1970s was some reduction in people's driving. **But** the long-term effect changed the car-buying habits of Americans, perhaps permanently, in ways car manufacturers could not ignore. They...

Use a comma + *but* if what follows only qualifies what preceded.

- ✓ The immediate consequence of higher gas prices in the 1970s was some reduction in people's driving, **but** that did not last long. The long-term effect was a change in the car-buying habits of Americans, a change that car manufacturers could not ignore. They...

## Three Special Cases: Colon, Dash, Parentheses

These last three ways of signaling the end of a grammatical sentence are a bit self-conscious but might be interesting to those who want to distinguish themselves from most other writers.

**8. Colon** Discerning readers are likely to notice and appreciate when you end a sentence with an appropriate colon. They take it as shorthand for *to illustrate*, *for example*, *that is*, *therefore*:

- ✓ Dance is not widely supported; no company operates at a profit, and there are few outside major cities.

A colon can also signal more obviously than a comma or semicolon that you are balancing the structure, sound, and meaning of one clause against another:

- ✓ Civil disobedience is the public conscience of a democracy; mass enthusiasm is the public consensus of a tyranny.

If you follow the colon with a grammatical sentence, capitalize the first word or not, depending on how much you want to emphasize what follows (note: some handbooks claim that the first word after a colon should not be capitalized, so know your context).

## Quick Tip

Avoid a colon if it breaks a clause into two pieces, neither of which is a grammatically complete sentence. Avoid this:

Genetic counseling requires; a knowledge of statistical genetics, an awareness of choices open to parents, and the psychological competence to deal with emotional trauma.

Instead, put the colon only after a whole subject-verb-object structure (underlined):

- ✓ Genetic counseling requires the following: a knowledge of statistical genetics, an awareness of choices open to parents, and the psychological competence to deal with emotional trauma.

**9. Dash** You can also signal balance more informally with a dash—it suggests a casual afterthought:

- ✓ Stonehenge is a wonder—only a genius could have conceived it.

Contrast that with a more formal colon: it makes a difference.

**10. Parentheses** You can use parentheses to insert a short grammatical sentence inside another one if what you put in the parentheses is like a short afterthought. Do not put a period after the sentence inside the parentheses:

- ✓ Stonehenge is a wonder (only a genius could have conceived it).

Though some ways of punctuating the end of a sentence are flat-out wrong, you can choose from among many that are right, and each has a different effect. If you look again at that passage by Mary Wollstonecraft about the waterfall (p. 154), you can see those choices in contrast.

## Intended Sentence Fragments

A punctuated sentence that fails to include an independent main clause is wrong. At least in theory. In fact, experienced writers often write

fragments deliberately, as you just saw. Such fragments typically have two characteristics:

- They are relatively short, fewer than ten or so words.
- They are intended to reflect a mind at work, as if the writer were speaking to you, finishing a sentence, then immediately expanding and qualifying it. Almost as an afterthought, often ironically.

In this passage, Mark Twain uses sentence fragments along with sentences beginning with conjunctions to capture the element of chance in the circumstances that made him an author (fragments are boldfaced):

For amusement I scribbled things for the Virginia City *Enterprise*. . . . One of my efforts attracted attention, and the *Enterprise* sent for me and put me on its staff.

And so I became a journalist—**another link**. By and by Circumstance and the Sacramento *Union* sent me to the Sandwich Islands for five or six months, to write up sugar. I did it; **and threw in a good deal of extraneous matter that hadn't anything to do with sugar**. But it was this extraneous matter that helped me to another link.

It made me notorious, and San Francisco invited me to lecture. **Which I did. And profitably**. I had long had a desire to travel and see the world, and now Circumstance had most kindly and unexpectedly hurled me upon the platform and furnished me the means. So I joined the “Quaker City Excursion.”

—“The Turning-Point of My Life”

You should know, however, that writers rarely use sentence fragments in academic prose. They are generally considered too casual. If you decide to experiment, be sure that your audience can tell that you know what you're doing.

## Punctuating Beginnings

You won't have to punctuate the beginning of a sentence if it begins directly with its subject (as this one does). However, as with this one, when a sentence forces a reader to plow through several introductory words, phrases, and clauses, especially when they have their own internal, perhaps even complicated, punctuation and readers might be confused by it all (as you may be right now), forget trying to get the punctuation right: just revise it.

There are a few rules that your readers expect you to follow, but more often you have to rely on judgment.

### Five Reliable Rules

1. Always separate an introductory element from the subject of a sentence with a comma if a reader might misunderstand the structure of the sentence, as in this one:

| When a lawyer concludes her argument has to be easily remembered by a jury.

Do this:

- | ✓ When a lawyer concludes her argument has to be easily remembered by a jury.

**2. Never end an introductory clause or phrase with a semicolon.** This rule applies no matter how long that introductory part is and even if it contains internal punctuation. Readers take semicolons to signal the end of a grammatical sentence (but see p. 194 for an exception). Never this:

Although the museum possessed a formidable collection of Mesopotamian artifacts, some more than five thousand years old; it could display only a fraction of them.

Use a comma there instead:

- | ✓ Although the museum possessed a formidable collection of Mesopotamian artifacts, some more than five thousand years old, it could display only a fraction of them.

**3. Never put a comma right after a subordinating conjunction if the next element of the clause is its subject.** Never this:

- | Although the art of punctuation is simple, it is rarely mastered.

**4. Avoid putting a comma after the coordinating conjunctions *and*, *but*, *yet*, *for*, *so*, *or*, and *nor* if the next element is the subject.** Do not do this:

- | But we cannot know whether life on other planets exists.

Some writers who punctuate heavily put a comma after a coordinating or subordinating conjunction if an introductory word or phrase follows:

- | ✓ Yet during this period prices continued to rise.
- | ✓ Although during this period prices continued to rise, interest rates did not.

Punctuation that heavy can slow readers down, but it's your choice. These are also correct and perhaps a bit brisker:

- | ✓ Yet during this period prices continued to rise.
- | ✓ Yet during this period prices continued to rise.

**5. Put a comma after an introductory word or phrase if it comments on the whole of the following sentence or connects one sentence to another.** These include adjectives like *fortunately*, *allegedly*, etc. and connecting adverbs like *however*, *nevertheless*, *otherwise*, etc. Readers hear a pause after such words.

- | ✓ Fortunately we were able to win our case.
- | ✓ Not surprisingly the defendant plans to appeal.

But avoid starting many sentences with an introductory element and a comma. When we read a series of such sentences, the whole passage feels hesitant. However, we typically omit a comma after *now*, *thus*, and *hence*:

- | ✓ Now it is clear that many will not support this position.

- ✓ **Thus** the only alternative is to choose some other action.
- ✓ Her computer crashed, and she had no backup. **Hence** she was forced to begin anew.

## Two Reliable Principles

### 1. Readers usually need no punctuation between a short introductory phrase and the subject:

- ✓ **Once again** we find similar responses to such stimuli.
- ✓ **In 1066** William the Conqueror landed on England's southern shore.

It is not wrong to put a comma there, but it slows readers down just as you may want them to be picking up speed.

### 2. Readers usually need a comma between a long (four or five words or more) introductory phrase or clause and the subject:

- ✓ When a lawyer begins her opening statement with a dry recital of the law, the jury is likely to nod off.

## Punctuating Middles

This is where explanations get messy, because to punctuate inside a grammatical sentence—more specifically, inside a clause—you have to consider not only the grammar of that clause but also the nuances of rhythm, meaning, and emphasis that you want readers to hear in their minds as they read. There are, however, a few reliable rules you should follow.

### Subject—Verb, Verb—Object

Do not put a comma between a subject and its verb, no matter how long the subject (nor between the verb and its object). Do not do this:

A sentence that consists of many complex subordinate clauses and long phrases that all precede a verb may seem to some students to demand a comma somewhere.

If you keep subjects short, you won't feel that you need a comma.

Occasionally, you cannot avoid a long subject, especially if it consists of a list of items and has internal punctuation, like this:

Hobbits, men, dwarves, elves, goblins, orcs, trolls, and giants are only the most anthropomorphic of the many “peoples” who inhabit J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth.

You can help readers sort it out with a summative subject:

- Insert a colon or a dash at the end of the list of subjects.
- Add a one-word subject that summarizes the preceding list:

- ✓ Hobbits, men, dwarves, elves, goblins, orcs, trolls, and giants, **these** are only the most anthropomorphic of the many “peoples” who inhabit J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth.



Choose a dash or a colon depending on how formal you want to seem. A dash is less formal.

## Interruptions

When you interrupt a subject-verb or verb-object, you make it harder for readers to make the basic grammatical connections that create a sentence. So in general, avoid such interruptions, except for reasons of emphasis or nuance (see pp. 129–130).

If you must interrupt a subject and verb or verb and object with more than a few words, always put paired commas around the interruption.

| ✓ A sentence **if it includes subordinate clauses** may seem to need commas.

Generally speaking, do not use a comma when you tack on a subordinate clause at the end of an independent clause if that subordinate clause is necessary to understand the meaning of the sentence (this is analogous to a restrictive relative clause):

| ✓ No one should violate the law **just because it seems unjust**.

If the clause is not necessary, separate it from the main clause with a comma (this is analogous to a nonrestrictive relative clause).

| ✓ No one should violate the law because in the long run it will do more harm than good.

This distinction can be tricky at times, and some editors and teachers regard a comma before a subordinating conjunction as an error rather than an option.

You may locate adverbial phrases before, after, or in the middle of a clause, depending on the emphasis you want readers to hear. If in the middle, put a comma before and after. Compare the different emphases in these:

| ✓ **In recent years** modern poetry has become more relevant to the average reader.

| ✓ Modern poetry has **in recent years** become more relevant to the average reader.

| ✓ Modern poetry has become **in recent years** more relevant to the average reader.

| ✓ Modern poetry has become more relevant to the average reader **in recent years**.

## Loose Commentary

Loose commentary, which you can think of as an aside or elaboration, differs from an interruption because you can usually move an interruption elsewhere in a sentence. But loose commentary modifies what it stands next to, so it usually cannot be moved. It still needs to be set off with paired commas, parentheses, or dashes, unless it comes at the end of a sentence. In that case, replace the second comma or dash with a period.

It is difficult to explain exactly what counts as loose commentary because it depends on both grammar and meaning. One familiar distinction is between restrictive clauses and nonrestrictive clauses (see pp. 10–11), including appositives.

We use no commas with restrictive modifiers, modifiers that uniquely identify the noun they modify:

- | ✓ The house **that I live in** is 100 years old.

But we always set off nonrestrictive modifiers with paired commas (unless the modifier ends the sentence):

- | ✓ We had to reconstruct the larynx **which is the source of voice** with cartilage from the shoulder.

An appositive is just a truncated nonrestrictive clause:

- | ✓ We had to rebuild the larynx **which is the source of voice** with cartilage from the shoulder.

You can achieve a more casual effect with a dash or parentheses:

- | ✓ We had to rebuild the larynx **the source of voice** with cartilage from the shoulder.
- | ✓ We had to rebuild the larynx **(the source of voice)** with cartilage from the shoulder.

A dash is useful when the loose commentary has internal commas. Readers are confused by the long subject in this sentence:

- | The nations of Central Europe, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bosnia, Serbia have for centuries been in the middle of an East-West tug-of-war.

They can understand that kind of structure more easily when they can see that explanatory list set off with dashes or parentheses:

- | ✓ The nations of Central Europe **Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bosnia, Serbia** have for centuries been in the middle of an East-West tug-of-war.

Use parentheses when you want readers to hear your comment as a *sotto voce* aside:

- | ✓ The brain **(at least that part that controls nonprimitive functions)** may comprise several little brains operating simultaneously.

Also use parentheses for an explanatory note inside a sentence:

- | ✓ Lamarck **(1744–1829)** was a pre-Darwinian evolutionist.
- | ✓ The poetry of the *fin de siècle* **(end of the century)** was characterized by a world-weariness and fashionable despair.

When loose commentary is at the end of a sentence, use a comma to separate it from the first part of the sentence. Be certain, however, that the meaning of the

comment is not crucial to the meaning of the sentence. If it is, do not use a comma. Contrast these:

- ✓ I wandered through Europe **seeking a place where I could write undisturbed.**
- ✓ I spent my time **seeking a place where I could write undisturbed.**
- ✓ Offices will be closed July 2–6 **as announced in the daily bulletin.**
- ✓ When closing offices, secure all safes **as prescribed in the manual.**
- ✓ Historians have studied the domestic lives of ordinary people **at least in recent years.**
- ✓ These records must be kept **at least until the auditors review them.**

## Punctuating Coordinate Elements

### Punctuating Two Coordinate Elements

Generally speaking, do not put a comma between just two coordinate elements. Compare these:

- As computers have become sophisticated **and** powerful they have taken over more clerical **and** bookkeeping tasks.
- ✓ As computers have become sophisticated **and** powerful they have taken over more clerical **and** bookkeeping tasks.

### Four Exceptions

**1. For a dramatic contrast, put a comma after the first coordinate element to emphasize the second (keep the second short):**

- ✓ The ocean is nature's most glorious creation **and** its most destructive.
- To emphasize a contrast, use a comma before a *but*, again keeping the second part short:
- ✓ Organ transplants are becoming more common **but** not less expensive.

**2. If you want your readers to feel the cumulative power of a coordinate pair (or more), drop the *and* and leave just a comma. Compare:**

- ✓ Lincoln never had a formal education **and** never owned a large library.
- ✓ Lincoln never had a formal education **,** never owned a large library.
- ✓ The lesson of the pioneers was to ignore conditions that seemed difficult or even overwhelming **and** to get on with the business of subduing a hostile environment.

- ✓ The lesson of the pioneers was to ignore conditions that seemed difficult or even overwhelming to get on with the business of subduing a hostile environment.

**3. Put a comma between long coordinate pairs only if you think your readers need a chance to breathe or to sort out the grammar.** Compare:

It is in the graveyard that Hamlet finally realizes that the inevitable end of life is the **grave and clay and that** the end of all pretentiousness and all plotting and counter-plotting, regardless of one's station in life, must be dust.

The comma after *clay* signals a natural pause:

- ✓ It is in the graveyard that Hamlet finally realizes that the inevitable end of all life is the **grave and clay,** and that the end of all pretentiousness and all plotting and counter-plotting, regardless of one's station in life, must be dust.

More important, it sorts out the grammatical structure of a potentially confusing sequence *grave and clay and that*.

In this next sentence, the first half of a coordination is long, so a reader might have a problem connecting the second half to its origin:

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* brilliantly dramatizes those primitive impulses that lie deep in each of us and stir only in our darkest dreams **but** asserts the need for the values that control those impulses.

A comma after *dreams* would clearly mark the end of one coordinate member and the beginning of the next:

- ✓ Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* brilliantly dramatizes those primitive impulses that lie deep in each of us and stir only in our darkest dreams, **but** asserts the need for the values that control those impulses.

On the other hand, if you can make sense out of a complicated sentence like that only with punctuation, you probably need to revise the sentence.

**4. If a sentence begins with a phrase or subordinate clause modifying two following clauses that are independent and coordinate, put a comma after the introductory phrase or clause but do not put a comma between the two coordinate independent clauses:**

- ✓ Once the financial crisis ended, the stock market rebounded, but unemployment persisted.

## Punctuating Three or More Coordinate Elements

Finally, there is the matter of punctuating a series of three or more coordinate elements. Writers and handbooks disagree on this one. Most hold that a comma should precede the coordinating conjunction introducing the last element, but some omit it:

- ✓ His wit, his charm, and his loyalty made him our friend.
- ✓ His wit, his charm and his loyalty made him our friend.

Both are correct, but be consistent.

If any of the items in the series has its own internal commas, use semicolons to show readers how they should group the coordinate items:

- ✓ In mystery novels, the principal action ought to be economical, organic, and logical; fascinating, yet not exotic; clear, but complicated enough to hold the reader's interest.

## Apostrophes

There are few options with apostrophes, only rules, and they are real rules (review pp. 8–9). Those who violate them are derided by those who police such matters.

### Contractions

Use an apostrophe in all contracted words:

I    don't    we'll    she'd    I'm    it's

Writers in the academic world often avoid contractions in their professional writing because they don't want to seem too casual. We've used them in this book because we wanted to avoid a formal tone. If you are a student, check with your teacher before you experiment.

### Plurals

Except for two cases, *never use an apostrophe to form a plural*. Never this: *bus's*, *fence's*, *horse's*. That error invites withering abuse.

Use an apostrophe to form plurals in only two contexts: (1) with all lower-case single letters and (2) with the single capital letters *A*, *I*, and *U* (the added *s* would seem to spell the words *As*, *Is*, and *Us*):

I    Dot your i's and cross your t's.    many A's and I's

But when a word is unambiguously all numbers or multiple capital letters, add just *s*, with no apostrophe:

The ABCs	the 1950s	767s
CDs	URLs	45s

### Possessives

With a few exceptions, form the possessive of a singular common or proper noun by adding an apostrophe + *s*:

I    an eagle's wingspan    South Korea's technology companies

Apply this rule even to common or proper nouns that end in *s*:

I    an hourglass's shape    Keats's odes

For plural common and proper nouns that end in *s*, form the possessive by adding an apostrophe only.

| workers' votes    the Smiths' house

Form the possessive of a singular compound noun by adding an apostrophe + *s* to the last word:

| the attorney general's decision    his sister-in-law's business

When both the singular and plural of a noun end in *s* and are spelled the same, add only the apostrophe:

| politics' importance    the United Arab Emirates' oil

Other handbooks and style manuals, though, give different guidance. Some, for example, recommend using an apostrophe alone when forming the possessive of proper nouns that end in *s*, especially when they are biblical or classical:

| Moses' tablets    Sophocles' plays

Whatever you choose, be consistent.

## Summing Up

There are some real rules governing punctuation, but you also have a wide range of choices. Use your judgment, and punctuate in ways that help your readers see the connections and separations that they have to see to make sense of your sentences.

1. Always signal the end of a grammatical sentence. You can do so in ten ways. Three are conventional and common:

- |                                    |                             |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Period                           | <i>I win. You lose.</i>     |
| • Semicolon                        | <i>I win; you lose.</i>     |
| • Comma + coordinating conjunction | <i>I win, and you lose.</i> |

Four are debatable, but good writers do sometimes use them, especially the first:

- |  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| • Period + coordinating conjunction    | <i>I win. And you lose.</i> |
| • Semicolon + coordinating conjunction | <i>I win; and you lose.</i> |
| • Coordinating conjunction alone       | <i>I win and you lose.</i>  |
| • Comma alone                          | <i>I win, you lose.</i>     |

Three are for writers who want to be a bit stylish in their punctuation:

- |               |                          |
|---------------|--------------------------|
| • Colon       | <i>I win: you lose.</i>  |
| • Dash        | <i>I win—you lose.</i>   |
| • Parentheses | <i>I win (you lose).</i> |

2. These are reliable rules of punctuation. Observe them.

- Always separate an introductory element from the subject if a reader might misunderstand the structure of the sentence.
- Never end an introductory clause or phrase with a semicolon.
- Do not put a comma after a subordinating conjunction if the next element of the clause is its subject.
- Likewise, do not put a comma after a coordinating conjunction if the next element of the clause is its subject.
- Put a comma after a short introductory word or phrase if it comments on the whole of the following sentence or if it connects one sentence to another.

3. These are strong principles:

- Put a comma after a short introductory phrase or not, as you choose.
- Put a comma after a long introductory phrase or clause.

4. These are reliable rules of internal punctuation. Observe them.

- Do not interrupt a subject and verb or verb and object with any punctuation, unless absolutely necessary for clarity.
- Inside a clause, always set off long interruptions with paired commas, parentheses, or dashes. Never use semicolons.
- Put a comma at the end of an independent clause before a tacked-on subordinate clause when that clause is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.

5. Use commas to separate items in a series if the items have no internal punctuation. Use semicolons to set off items in a series if they do.

6. Know and follow the rules governing apostrophes, and where you have choices, be consistent.

## Appendix II

# Using Sources

---

*Everything of importance has been said before by  
somebody who did not discover it.*  
—ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

Few writers can get by on their own thoughts alone, and researchers never can. We all write better when our thinking is enriched by what we learn from others. There are rules for using the words and ideas of others, and your first obligation is to understand and follow them. Mistakes here can damage your credibility, your grade, and even your reputation for honesty.

But as with other aspects of style, you also have choices, and this lesson, like our others, focuses not just on what you *must* do to use sources properly but on what you *can* do to use them effectively.

### Using Sources Properly

The first part of this appendix concerns the mechanics of using sources: how to avoid plagiarism, take good notes, punctuate quotations, and cite appropriately. These things can seem tedious, but you must learn to do them right so that you can do something more important: incorporate sources effectively into your writing.

### Avoiding Plagiarism

Plagiarism means using the words or ideas of others in ways that suggest they are one's own. It is among the most serious transgressions a writer can commit. Only a few—for example, fabricating evidence or outright lying—are worse. We begin with this issue not to suggest that you are dishonest but to emphasize its seriousness and then to put it behind us, so that we can attend to the *choices* you have when using sources.



Honest writers sometimes think they don't have to worry about plagiarism. But even honest writers can plagiarize inadvertently, and even inadvertent plagiarism can damage a writer's credibility and reputation or bring disciplinary consequences. Yet just as you can't write well if, with every word you set down, you worry about violating some rule of correctness, so you can't write well if, with every source you use, you worry about committing an act of plagiarism. You need to fear plagiarizing only if you fail to understand and follow reliable practices that ensure you will avoid it.

Plagiarists steal more than words: they steal the respect and recognition due to others for their work. And student plagiarists also steal acknowledgment and even grades due to their peers by making their peers' work seem worse in comparison to their own. When such theft becomes common, the community grows suspicious, then distrustful, then cynical: *So who cares? Everyone does it.* Teachers then must concern themselves less with teaching and learning and more with detecting dishonesty. Those who plagiarize thus fray the ethical fabric of their academic or professional communities.

The overriding principle is this: *avoid doing anything that might lead an informed reader to think that you are taking credit for words or ideas that are not your own.* This principle applies to sources of any kind: print, online, recorded, or oral. Some writers think that if something is freely circulated online, they are free to treat it as their own. They are wrong: cite everything you borrow.

In particular, follow these practices:

1. **When you quote from a source:** cite the source according to the conventions of your field, and put those words in quotation marks or in a block quotation.
2. **When you paraphrase a passage from a source:** cite the source according to the conventions of your field, and recast the passage entirely in your own words and in a new sentence structure.
3. **When you use an idea or method you found in a source:** cite the source according to the conventions of your field. If the entire source concerns the idea or method, do not add page numbers.

Of course, you can't follow these good practices if you take sloppy notes or if you don't know how to properly quote from and cite your sources.

## Taking Good Notes

To use and cite sources appropriately, you must start by taking good notes. Since that work can be tedious, set up a system to get things right the first time so that you don't have to check and recheck, again and again.

1. **Record bibliographical information the first time you touch a source.** Do this early, not when you are rushing to meet a deadline.

**For books, record**

- ☐ author(s)
- ☐ title (and subtitle)
- ☐ title of series (if any)
- ☐ edition or volume (if any)
- ☐ city and publisher
- ☐ year published
- ☐ pages for chapter (if any)

**For articles, record**

- ☐ author(s)
- ☐ title (and subtitle)
- ☐ journal, magazine, etc.
- ☐ volume and issue number
- ☐ online database (if any)
- ☐ date published
- ☐ pages for article

Online sources are less predictable. In addition to the above information, record at least the URL and the access date, as well as any other information that might help you identify the source for readers.

2. **Record quotations exactly.** Copy quotations *exactly* as they appear in the original, down to every comma and semicolon. If the quotation is long, photocopy it, cut-and-paste it, or download the entire source.
3. **Mark quotations and paraphrases unambiguously as the words of others.** This is crucial: take notes so that weeks or months later you *cannot possibly* think that words and ideas from a source are your own. Whether you take notes on paper or on a computer, *always* highlight or use a different font to distinguish direct quotations. Then distinguish paraphrases and summaries another way. Prominent scholars have been humiliated by accusations of plagiarism because—they claimed—they did not clearly mark words they copied or paraphrased, then “forgot” they were not their own.
4. **Don’t paraphrase too closely.** When you paraphrase a source in your notes, you must do more than merely replace words in the source with synonyms. That is also considered plagiarism, even if you cite the source. You must recast the entire passage in your own language, which includes using your own sentence structure. For example, the first paraphrase below is plagiarism because it tracks the structure of the original almost word for word. The second paraphrase is paraphrased appropriately.

**Original:**

At the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war. To move beyond this static and limiting view, we can remember the Chinese approach to yin and yang. They are two principles, yes, but they are conceived not as irreconcilable polar opposites but as elements that coexist and should be brought into balance as much as possible.

—Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture:  
Stopping America’s War of Words*

**Plagiarized:**

At the center of our culture of argument is our tendency to regard positions and ideas as entirely and irresolvably in conflict.

To get past this rigid and narrow understanding, we need to see our concepts not as completely opposed but as perspectives that exist simultaneously and that should be harmonized to the fullest possible extent.

**Appropriate:** Our society's approach to argument is based on an assumption that competing positions and ideas must always be in conflict. To transcend it, we need to recognize that these competing positions and ideas can often be reconciled.

## Punctuating Quotations

Here are three rules for using punctuation with quotation marks:

### 1. If the quotation ends in a period, comma, semicolon, or colon, replace it with the punctuation you need in your own sentence.

- If your punctuation is a period or comma, put it *before* a final quotation mark:

John Maynard Keynes observed, "In the long run we are all dead."

When John Maynard Keynes observed, "In the long run we are all dead," he was reminding us not to be seduced by abstract economic theory.

- If your punctuation is a question mark, colon, or semicolon, put it *after* the final quotation mark:

My first bit of advice is "Quit complaining"; my second is "Get moving."

The Old West served up plenty of "rough justice": lynchings and other forms of casual punishment were not uncommon.

How many law professors believe in "natural law"?

Why does Keats write, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"?

### 2. If the quotation ends with a question mark or exclamation point and your punctuation is a period or comma, drop your punctuation and put the question mark or exclamation point *before* the quotation mark:

Freud famously asked, "What do women want?"

### 3. If you use quotation marks inside a quotation, put your comma or period before both of the marks:

She said, "I have no idea how to interpret 'Ode to a Nightingale.'"

## Citing Sources Appropriately

Your last task is to cite your sources fully, accurately, and appropriately. No one will accuse you of plagiarism for a misplaced comma, but some will conclude that if you cannot get these little matters right, you cannot be trusted on the big ones. There are many styles you can use for your citations, so find out which one your readers expect. Three are most common:

- Chicago style, from *The Chicago Manual of Style*, common in the humanities and some social sciences
- MLA style, from the Modern Language Association, common in literary studies and in high school and college writing classes
- APA style, from the American Psychological Association, common in the social sciences

You can find guides to citation in most bookstores or online.

## Using Sources Effectively

Again, to use sources ethically, you must quote accurately, paraphrase appropriately, and follow the citation conventions of your field. But to use sources effectively, you must do more than follow sound rules and practices. As with other aspects of style, you have choices in how you incorporate sources into your writing, and you can shape the responses of your readers through the choices you make. To use a source in your writing, you have to make at least three decisions:

- **How much of the source to include:** Will you use just a word or phrase, a sentence, a passage, or a summary of the whole?
- **How to include it:** Will you use the source's exact words or put its ideas into your own words?
- **How to attribute it:** Will you explicitly attribute the words or ideas you use to the source's author?

Before we discuss these choices, a word of caution: like citation conventions, ways of using sources vary from field to field. In some fields, writers quote extensively; in others, they quote rarely, relying instead on summary and paraphrase. The best way to learn the typical practices of your field is to read writers who are recognized authorities in it.

Here, in general terms, are your options. (Note: these illustrations use parenthetical citations; in your own writing, you should follow the conventions of your field.)

### How Much of a Source to Include?

To use a source in your writing, you must first decide how much of it to include through quotation, paraphrase, or summary: just a few words, a single sentence, a longer passage, a summary of the whole? There are no hard-and-fast rules that answer this question, but here are three principles to help you choose:

1. **Include just as much of a source as you need.** If you don't quote or paraphrase enough, your writing can seem thin and disconnected from the larger conversation to which it contributes; if you quote or paraphrase too much, your writing can seem plodding or insecure. It's hard to know what's "just right": that sense of proportion comes gradually, through instruction, reading,

and practice. Our best advice is this: make your choice not to ease your anxieties but to enhance your argument.

2. **Include a source in proportion to the attention you want to give it.** If a source is especially important to your thinking or if you discuss it in detail, include more of it; if you acknowledge it only in passing, include less of it.
3. **Include a source in proportion to your stance toward it.** This principle is a matter of *ethos*, or the character you project as a writer (see p. 162). When you agree with a source, you can include it less prominently in your writing because readers assume you are representing it accurately and fairly. When you challenge a source, you need to include more of it to assure your readers that you are giving it its due. You cannot risk even the appearance that you are distorting a source's meaning to make it easier to question.

## How to Include a Source: Summary, Paraphrase, or Quotation?

Once you've decided *how much* of a source to include, you have to choose *how* you will include it. You can summarize, paraphrase, or quote. To *summarize* is to briefly present a source's main points in your own words; to *paraphrase* is to recast a specific passage from a source in your own words; to *quote* is to repeat words from a source exactly. A good rule of thumb is to quote only when you need a source's exact words; otherwise, summarize or paraphrase. Here, in detail, are your options.

**Summarize.** You can summarize a whole source, a section of it, or even an aspect of it. Use summary to give your readers a *general* understanding of what a source says; do not rely on summary to communicate the details of a source's argument or if you want to use a source as evidence (for example, if you want to discuss a passage from a novel, or if you want to analyze data from a research report). Summaries can vary in length from a single clause or sentence to several paragraphs. How long a summary should be depends on how you want to use it. Choose in light of the three principles above.

When you summarize, you ask your readers to trust that you are representing your source accurately and fairly. Some novice writers are reluctant to accept this responsibility, either because they are unsure they fully understand their source or because they worry that in summarizing it they will distort it. These worries reflect important truths. Summarizing is difficult because it involves not just repeating or recasting passages from a source but distilling a sense of the whole. Nevertheless, because summary is fundamental to most forms of academic and professional writing, you must try.

Strictly speaking, no summary can capture the *exact* meaning of the original source. Every decision about what to include or leave out is also an interpretation, a decision about what you understand a source to mean and about what you want it to mean for your readers. Skilled writers, however, see this situation not as an insurmountable problem but as an opportunity to *shade* a source, to emphasize

some of its aspects over others. In fact, knowing how far one can go in shading a source without *misrepresenting* it is a mark of true expertise: it is a powerful way to demonstrate command of a topic and to guide the attention of your readers. Unfortunately, we can't tell you where the line is. You have to learn for yourself by reading respected writers in your field. We can offer two bits of advice. The first is to be cautious. It is much better to be seen as too fastidious than as cavalier. The second is to be doubly cautious when you disagree with a source, because in that situation, you cannot risk seeming unfair.

**Paraphrase.** Earlier, we discussed paraphrase in the context of plagiarism. Now, we want to approach it from the perspective of style. When you paraphrase, as when you summarize, you inevitably shade the meaning of your source. How could you not? Every change in grammar or vocabulary also involves a change in meaning, however slight. Your challenge is to manage these small shifts in meaning deliberately and responsibly. Look again at Tannen's original passage and our paraphrase of it:

At the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war. To move beyond this static and limiting view, we can remember the Chinese approach to yin and yang. They are two principles, yes, but they are conceived not as irreconcilable polar opposites but as elements that coexist and should be brought into balance as much as possible. (284)

—Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*

Our society's approach to argument, notes linguist Deborah Tannen, is based on an assumption that competing positions and ideas must always be in conflict. To transcend it, we need to recognize that these competing positions and ideas can often be reconciled (284).

Our paraphrase doesn't convey the meaning of Tannen's original exactly; it expresses our own understanding of it, which also includes our sense of what aspects of it are most important. Could someone else paraphrase the passage differently? Of course. Even so, we believe our version to be accurate and fair.

When paraphrasing, you can't avoid these kinds of choices, but you can make them deliberately and ethically, which is to say in ways that are faithful to your source, that support your own line of thought, and that serve your readers.

Now let's turn to several ways of quoting.

**Use a block quotation.** If your quotation is more than a few lines, put it into a block quotation with no quotation marks around it. Indent the same number of spaces as you indent a paragraph. If the quotation begins with a paragraph indentation, indent the first line again:

About our society's approach to argument, linguist Deborah Tannen offers this observation:

At the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war. To move beyond

this static and limiting view, we can remember the Chinese approach to yin and yang. They are two principles, yes, but they are conceived not as irreconcilable polar opposites but as elements that coexist and should be brought into balance as much as possible. (284)

The most common practice, as in that example, is to introduce a block quotation with words that announce it, followed by a period or colon.

You can also let the quotation complete the grammar of your introductory sentence. In that case, punctuate the end of your sentence as if you were running the block quotation into your text:

Linguist Deborah Tannen observes that the core of our society's approach to argument  
is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war . . .

A block quotation visually sets off the quotation from your own text. Choose it if you need to quote at length and plan to address the quotation in detail.

**Drop in a quotation.** If your quotation is four or fewer lines, you can drop it into your text, introducing it with a brief "tag" phrase (boldfaced):

According to linguist Deborah Tannen, "At the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war" (284).

As Tannen says/asserts/states/claims/comments/notes/observes/suggests, "At the heart . . ." (284).

The verb indicates your attitude toward the quotation, so choose it carefully.

If the author of the quotation isn't clear from context, provide it in your citation:

According to one eminent linguist, "At the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war" (Tannen 284).

You can create a nuance of rhythm or emphasis by breaking up the quotation with your tag phrase, like this:

"At the heart of the argument culture," writes linguist Deborah Tannen, "is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war" (284).

You can also insert a quotation as a dependent clause. In that case, don't use a comma, and begin the quotation with a lowercase letter even if it was capitalized in the original:

Linguist Deborah Tannen observes that "at the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war" (284).

Drop in a quotation when you want to give your readers an author's full thought in his or her own words. But too many quotations dropped into a text can feel intrusive, and readers might question your thinking if they find bare quotations dropped in with little or no effort to connect them to your own points. So when you quote, be sure to indicate how the quotation contributes to *your* line of thought.

**Weave in a quotation.** Weaving a quotation into your own sentence, like this, can help you incorporate it into your own thinking:

Linguist Deborah Tannen suggests that to change our "argument culture," we need to stop "seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war" and to view them instead "as elements that coexist and should be brought into balance as much as possible" (284).

To make the quotation fit your sentence, you can modify it by adding, deleting, or even changing words. If you do, be sure not to change the quotation's meaning. Indicate additions or modifications with square brackets and deletions with three spaced dots or *ellipses* (use four ellipses if you delete a sentence or more):

Linguist Deborah Tannen suggests that to change our "argument culture," we need to stop "seeing issues and ideas as . . . continually at war" and, instead, to "[bring them] into balance as much as possible" (284).

You can also add emphasis to a quotation, but if you do, add *my emphasis*, *emphasis mine*, or *emphasis added* either in square brackets after the emphasis or in the parenthetical citation:

Linguist Deborah Tannen challenges us to view our different concepts "as *elements that coexist* [my emphasis] and should be brought into balance as much as possible" (284).

Linguist Deborah Tannen challenges us to view our different concepts "as elements that coexist and should be brought into *balance as much as possible*" (284, emphasis added).

Weaving a quotation into your own sentence works like a spotlight, focusing your readers' attention on particular words or phrases. The fewer words you quote, the tighter and brighter the beam. Compare:

Linguist Deborah Tannen suggests that "at the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war," and she challenges us to view them instead "as elements that coexist and should be brought into balance as much as possible" (284).

Linguist Deborah Tannen suggests that our "argument culture" is based on our tendency to regard "issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war," and she challenges us to "[bring them] into balance as much as possible" (284).



Linguist Deborah Tannen suggests that our “argument culture” is based on our tendency to regard different positions and concepts as “continually at war,” and she challenges us to seek a “balance” instead (284).

The fewer words you quote, the more emphasis they receive. But you sacrifice the context of the original and limit your readers’ ability to verify for themselves your interpretation of your source. When you quote isolated words or short phrases, you implicitly ask your readers to trust that you are representing your source accurately and fairly.

**Use just a few words from a source.** When you repeat just a few words from a source, you have to decide whether or not to quote them. If they are words anyone might use, treat them as your own. If they are strikingly original or especially important, put them in quotation marks and cite their source. Consider that first sentence from Tannen:

At the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war.

The phrase “issues and ideas” is so ordinary that it requires neither citation nor quotation marks. The term “argument culture,” though, is Tannen’s coinage and should be quoted and cited. Once you cite those words, you can use them again without quotation marks or citation.

## How to Attribute a Source: Explicitly or Not?

When summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting, you have to choose whether or not to name your source’s author explicitly. Compare the following:

Linguist Deborah Tannen observes that our society’s approach to argument is based on an assumption that competing positions and ideas must always be in conflict (284).

Our society’s approach to argument is based on an assumption that competing positions and ideas must always be in conflict (Tannen 284).

Which you should choose depends on your purpose. When you explicitly attribute an idea to another writer, as in the first version, you hold it at arm’s length. When you acknowledge an author only parenthetically, as in the second version, you seem to embrace her idea as your own. If you want to agree with Tannen, you could choose either version:

Linguist Deborah Tannen observes that our society’s approach to argument is based on an assumption that competing positions and ideas must always be in conflict (284). **This view helps us understand the shrill tone of much talk radio today.**

Our society’s approach to argument is based on an assumption that competing positions and ideas must always be in conflict (Tannen 284). **Recognizing this assumption helps us understand the shrill tone of much talk radio today.**

If you want to disagree with Tannen, you would probably choose the first version (note also the different verb):

Linguist Deborah Tannen **claims** that our society's approach to argument is based on an assumption that competing positions and ideas must always be in conflict (284). **But in fact, many in our society value different perspectives on complex issues.**

You need to attribute that first idea to someone else so you can disagree with it. If you don't, you might sound like you are contradicting yourself:

Our society's approach to argument is based on an assumption that competing positions and ideas must always be in conflict (Tannen 284). **But in fact, many in our society value different perspectives on complex issues.**

If you don't want to identify the author of your source by name, you can still attribute an idea generically:

**Some linguists claim** that our society's approach to argument is based on an assumption that competing positions and ideas must always be in conflict (Tannen 284). **But in fact, many in our society value different perspectives on complex issues.**

## Summing Up

You have ethical obligations to acknowledge words and ideas you borrow from others and to represent your sources accurately and fairly.

Plagiarism, or using the words or ideas of others in ways that suggest they are your own, is a serious transgression. To avoid the appearance of plagiarism, follow this principle:

- Avoid doing anything that might lead an informed reader to think that you are taking credit for words or ideas not your own.

Follow these three reliable practices for giving credit to your sources:

- When quoting from a source, put those words in quotation marks and cite the source according to the conventions of your field.
- When paraphrasing a passage from a source, recast the passage entirely in your own words and cite the source according to the conventions of your field.
- When taking an idea or method from a source, cite the source according to the conventions of your field.

Take notes in a way that ensures you will not mistake words or ideas from a source for your own words or ideas.

Punctuate and cite sources according to the conventions of your field.

Understand the choices you have to make to use sources effectively:

- **How much of the source to include:** Will you use just a word or phrase, a sentence, a passage, or a summary of the whole?

- **How to include it:** Will you use the source's exact words or put the source's ideas into your own words?
- **How to attribute it:** Will you explicitly attribute it to the source's author?

Summarize or paraphrase if you do not need a source's exact words; otherwise quote.

When quoting, you have these options:

- use a block quotation to set off a long quotation
- drop a quotation into your text
- weave a quotation into your text
- take just a few words from a source

Choose based on how you want your readers to respond to the quotation.

When you attribute a quotation or idea to its author, you hold it at arm's length, which allows you to agree or disagree with it. When you quote or paraphrase a passage without attributing it to its author, you seem to embrace it as your own.

# Glossary

*Grammar is the ground of all.*

—WILLIAM LANGLAND

*Most of the grounds of the world's troubles are matters of grammar.*

—MONTAIGNE

*There is a satisfactory boniness about grammar which the flesh of sheer vocabulary requires before it can become vertebrate and walk the earth. But to study it for its own sake, without relating it to function, is utter madness.*

—ANTHONY BURGESS

*Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school. . . . It will be proved to thy face, that thou hast men about thee that usually talk of a noun and a verb, and such abominable words as no christian ear can endure to hear.*

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, 2 HENRY VI, 4.7

What follows is no tight theory of grammar, just useful definitions for the terms in this book. Where the text discusses something at length, we refer you to those pages. If you want a quick review to get started, read the entries on subject, simple subject, whole subject, and verb.

**Action:** Prototypically, action is expressed by a verb: *move, hate, think, discover*. But actions also appear in nominalizations: *movement, hatred, thought, discovery*. Actions are also implied in some adjectives: *advisable, resultant, explanatory*, etc.

**Active Voice:** See p. 47.

**Adjectival Clause:** Adjectival clauses modify nouns. Also called relative clauses, they usually begin with a relative pronoun: *which, that, whom, whose, who*. There are two kinds: restrictive and nonrestrictive.

Restrictive      The book **that I read** was good.

Nonrestrictive      My car, **which you saw**, is gone.

**Adjective:** A word you can put *very* in front of: *very old, very interesting*. There are exceptions: *major, additional*, etc. Since this is also a test for adverbs, distinguish

adjectives from adverbs by putting them between *the* and a noun: *The occupational hazard, the major reason*, etc. Some nouns also appear there—*the chemical hazard*.

**Adjectival Phrase:** A phrase that functions like an adjective: *the jar in the refrigerator*.

**Adverb:** Adverbs modify all parts of speech except NOUNS:

Adjectives	<b>extremely</b> large, <b>rather</b> old
Verbs	<b>frequently</b> spoke, <b>often</b> slept
Adverbs	<b>extremely</b> carefully, <b>incredibly</b> rudely
Articles	<b>precisely</b> the man I meant, <b>just</b> the thing I need
Sentences	<b>Fortunately</b> , we were on time.

**Adverbial Phrase:** A phrase that functions like an adverb: *I came as soon as I could*.

**Adverbial Clause:** This is a kind of subordinate clause. It modifies a verb or adjective, indicating time, cause, condition, etc. It usually begins with a subordinating conjunction such as *because, when, if, since, while, unless*:

**If you leave**, I will stop.      **Because he left**, I did too.

**Agent:** Prototypically, agents are flesh-and-blood sources of an action, but for our purposes, an agent is the *seeming* source of any action, an entity without which the action could not occur: *She criticized the program in this report*. Often, we can make the means by which we do something a seeming agent: *This report criticizes the program*. Do not confuse agents with subjects. Agents prototypically are subjects, but an agent can be in a grammatical object: *I was arrested and interrogated by the police*.

**Appositive:** A noun phrase that is left after deleting **which** and **be**: *My dog, which is a dalmatian, ran away*.

**Article:** They are easier to list than to define: *a, an, and the*. An article is one kind of determiner.

**Character:** See p. 25.

**Clause:** A clause has two defining characteristics:

1. It has at least one subject and a verb.
2. The verb must agree with the subject in number and can be made past or present.

By this definition, these are clauses:

She left      that they leave      if she left      why he is leaving

These next are not, because the verbs cannot be made past tense and they do not agree in number with the putative subject:

for them to **go**

her **having gone**

**Comma Splice:** You create a comma splice when you join two independent clauses with only a comma:

Oil-producing countries depend too much on oil revenues, they should develop their educational and industrial resources, as well.

See p. 185.

**Complement:** Whatever completes a verb:

I am **home**.

You seem **tired**.

She helped **me**.

**Compound Noun Phrase:** See p. 53.

**Conjunction:** Usually defined as a word that links words, phrases, or clauses. They are easier to illustrate than define (the first two are also categorized as subordinating conjunctions):

adverbial conjunctions

because, although, when, since

relative conjunctions

who, whom, whose, which, that

sentence conjunctions

thus, however, therefore, nevertheless

coordinating conjunctions

and, but, yet, for, so, or, nor

correlative conjunctions

both X and Y, not only X but Y, (n)either X (n)or Y, X as well as Y

**Coordination:** Coordination joins two grammatical units of the same order with *and, or, nor, but, yet*:

same part of speech

you **and** I, red **and** black, run **or** jump

phrases

in the house **but** not in the basement

clauses

when I leave **or** when you arrive

**Dangling Modifier:** See p. 141.

**Dependent Clause:** Any clause that cannot be punctuated as a main clause, one beginning with a capital letter and ending with a period or question mark. It begins with a subordinating conjunction or relative pronoun:

why he left

because he left

that he took

**Determiner:** A word that precedes and comments on a noun but is not an adjective: *the, this, some, first, one, once*, etc.

**Direct Object:** The noun that follows a transitive verb and can be made the subject of a passive verb:

I found the **money**. → The **money** was found by me.

**Finite Verb:** A verb that can be made past or present. This is a finite verb because we can change its tense from past to present and vice versa:

She **wants** to leave. → She **wanted** to leave.

This is not a finite verb because we cannot change the infinitive to a past tense:

She wants to **leave**. → She wanted to **left**.

**Fragment:** A phrase or dependent clause that begins with a capital letter and ends with a period, question mark, or exclamation mark:

Because I left.

Though I am here!

What you did?

These are complete sentences:

He left because  
I did.

Though I am here,  
she is not!

I know what  
we did.

**Free Modifier:** See p. 134.

**Genre:** A class of texts that bear a family resemblance to one another and that function in context to facilitate specific kinds of communication.

**Gerund:** A nominalization created by adding *-ing* to a verb:

When she **left** we were happy. → Her **leaving** made us happy.

**Goal:** That toward which the action of a verb is directed. In most cases, goals are direct objects:

I see **you**.

I broke **the dish**.

I built **a house**.

But in some cases, the literal goal of an action can be the subject of an active verb:

I underwent an interrogation.

**She** received a warm welcome.

**Grammatical Sentence:** See p. 181.

**Hedge:** See pp. 118–119.

**Independent Clause:** A clause that that can be punctuated as a grammatical sentence.

**Infinitive:** A verb that cannot be made past or present. It often is preceded by the word *to*: *He decided to **stay***. But sometimes not: *We helped him **repair** the door*.

**Intensifier:** See p. 120.

**Intransitive Verb:** A verb that does not take an object and so cannot be made passive. These are not transitive verbs:

He **exists**.                      They **slept** soundly.                      She **became** a doctor.

**Linking Verb:** A verb with a complement that refers to its subject.

He **is** my brother.                      They **became** teachers.                      She **seems** reliable.

**Main Clause:** A main or independent clause has at least a subject and verb (imperatives are the exception) and can be punctuated as an independent sentence:

I left.                      Why did you leave?                      We are leaving.

A subordinate or dependent clause cannot be punctuated as an independent sentence. These are incorrectly punctuated:

Because she left.                      That they left.                      Whom you spoke to.

**Main Subject:** subject of the main clause.

**Metadiscourse:** See pp. 51–52.

**Nominalization:** See pp. 29–30.

**Nonrestrictive Clause:** See pp. 10–11.

**Noun:** A word that fits this frame: *The [ ] is good*. Some are concrete: *dog, rock, car*; others are abstract: *ambition, space, speed*. The nouns that most concern us are nominalizations, nouns derived from verbs or adjectives: *act* → *action*, *wide* → *width*.

**Noun Clause:** A noun clause functions like a noun, as the subject or object of a verb: *That you are here proves that you love me*.

**Object:** There are three kinds:

1. Direct object: the noun following a transitive verb:

I read the **book**. We followed the **car**.

2. Prepositional object: the noun following a preposition:

in the **house**    by the **walk**    with **fervor**



3. Indirect object: the noun between a verb and its direct object:

I *gave* the **waiter** a tip.

**Parallel:** Sequences of words, phrases, or clauses are parallel when they are of the same grammatical structure. This is parallel:

I decided to work hard and to do a good job.

This is not:

I decided to work hard and that I should do a good job.

**Passive Voice:** See p. 47.

**Past Participle:** Usually the same form as the past tense *-ed*: *jumped*, *worked*. Irregular verbs have irregular forms: *seen*, *broken*, *swum*, etc. It follows forms of *be* and *have*: *I have gone*. *It was found*. It sometimes serves as a modifier: *found money*.

**Personal Pronoun:** Easier to list than define: *I, me, we, us, my, mine; our, ours; you, your, yours; he, him, his; she, her, hers; they, them, their, theirs*.

**Phrase:** A group of words constituting a unit but not including a subject and a finite verb: *the dog, too old, was leaving, in the house, ready to work*.

**Possessive:** *my, your, his, her, its, their* or a noun ending with *-s* or *-s'*: the **dog's** tail.

**Predicate:** Whatever follows the whole subject, beginning with the verb phrase, including the complement and what attaches to it:

He left yesterday to buy a hat.

**Preposition:** Easier to list than to define: *in, on, up, over, of, at, by*, etc.

**Prepositional Phrase:** The preposition plus its object: *in + the house*.

**Present Participle:** The *-ing* form of a verb: *running, thinking*.

**Progressive:** A form of *be* followed by the present participle form of the verb: *Our team is winning the game*.

**Punctuated Sentence:** See p. 181.

**Relative Clause:** A clause beginning with a relative pronoun. See pp. 10–11.

**Relative Pronoun:** *who, whom, which, whose, that* when used in a relative clause.

**Restrictive Clause:** See pp. 10–11.

**Resumptive Modifier:** See pp. 132–133.

**Run-on Sentence:** A punctuated sentence consisting of two or more grammatical sentences not separated by either a coordinating conjunction or any mark of punctuation this entry illustrates a run-on sentence.

**Simple Subject:** The simple subject (italicized) is the smallest unit inside the whole subject (underlined) that determines whether a verb (boldfaced) is singular or plural:

The books that are required reading **are** listed.

The simple subject should be as close to its verb as you can get it.

If a book **is** required reading, it **is** listed.

**Stress:** See pp. 73–77.

**Subject:** The subject is what the verb agrees with in number:

**Two men** *are* at the door.

**One man** *is* at the door.

You must be able to distinguish the whole subject from its simple subject.

**Subjunctive:** A form of the verb used to talk about events that are contrary to fact:

If he **were** President...

**Subordinate Clause:** A clause that begins with a subordinating conjunction such as *if*, *when*, *unless*, or *which*, *that*, *who*. A subordinate clause is a type of dependent clause.

**Subordinating Conjunction:** *because*, *if*, *since*, *unless*, *although*, *while*, *after*, *before*, *when*, etc.

**Summative Modifier:** See pp. 133–134.

**Thematic Thread:** A sequence of themes running through a passage.

**Theme:** See pp. 79–80.

**Topic:** See pp. 63–65.

**Topic String:** The sequence of topics through a series of sentences.

**Transitive Verb:** A verb with a direct object. The direct object prototypically “receives” an action. The prototypical direct object can be made the subject of a passive verb:

We **read** the book. → The book **was read** by us.

By this definition, *resemble*, *become*, and *stand* (as in *He stands six feet tall*) are not transitive.

**Verb:** The word that must agree with the subject in number and that can be inflected for past or present:

The book **is** ready.

The books **were** returned.

**Whole Subject:** You can identify a whole subject once you identify its verb: Put a *who* or a *what* in front of the verb and turn the sentence into a question. The fullest answer to the question is the whole subject:

The ability of the city to manage education is an accepted fact.

Question: **What** is an accepted fact?

Answer (and whole subject): the ability of the city to manage education

Distinguish the whole subject from the simple subject:

The *ability* of the city to manage education is an accepted fact.

# Suggested Answers

You will almost certainly come up with answers different from these, many much better. Don't worry whether yours match ours word-for-word; focus only on the general principle of the lesson and exercise.

## EXERCISE 2.2

Whole subjects are underlined, simple subjects are italicized, verbs are boldfaced, characters are highlighted gold, and actions are highlighted pink.

- 1a. There is **opposition** among many **voters** to **nuclear power plants** based on a **belief** in **their** **threat** to human health.
- 1b. Many voters **oppose** **nuclear power plants** because **they** **believe** that such **plants** **threaten** human health.
- 3a. There is a **belief** among some **researchers** that **consumers'** **choices** at **fast food restaurants** **are** healthier because there are **postings** of nutrition information in menus.
- 3b. Some researchers **believe** that **consumers** **are** **choosing** healthier foods at fast food restaurants because **they** **are** **posting** nutrition information in **their** menus.
- 5a. Because the student's **preparation** for the exam **was** thorough, none of the questions on it **were** a **surprise** to her.
- 5b. Because the student **prepared** thoroughly for the exam, **she** **was** not **surprised** by any of the questions on it.

## EXERCISE 2.4

Note: In these answers we treat gerunds, or verbs ending in *-ing* that are used as nouns, as nominalizations.

- 1a. Verbs: *accept, elevates*. No nominalizations.
- 1b. Verbs: *has been*. Nominalizations: *speculation, improving, achievement*.
- 3a. Verbs: *understand, failed, to develop, to immunize*. Nominalizations: *cause, risk*.
- 3b. Verbs: *have been met*. Nominalizations: *attempts, defining, employment, failure*.
- 5a. Verbs: *resulted*. Nominalizations: *loss, share, closing*.
- 5b. Verbs: *embrace, teach*. No nominalizations.

## EXERCISE 2.5

- 1b. Educators have speculated about whether families can improve educational achievement (help students achieve more).
- 3b. Economists have attempted but failed to define full employment.
- 5a. As suburban shopping malls have lost market share to online stores, many have closed.

## EXERCISE 2.6

1. The developers had hoped to complete the facility before the end of the year, but because the contractors failed to remain on schedule, that was impossible.
3. Business executives predicted that the economy would quickly revive.
5. Several candidates attempted to explain why more voters participated in this year's elections.
7. The business sector did not independently study why the trade surplus suddenly increased.

## EXERCISE 3.1

1. We must explain the contradictions in the data.
3. In recent years, historians have newly recognized the contributions of African American women to the Civil Rights movement, leading them to reassess its impact and character.
5. Medical professionals usually decide on-scene whether to forcibly medicate patients who are unable to legally consent.
7. Although critics panned the show's latest season, loyal fans still loved it.

## EXERCISE 3.2

1. Young people gain independence when they learn skills valued by the marketplace. [Note how the passive here emphasizes "marketplace."]
3. In this article, I argue that even if Congress had not repealed the Glass-Steagall Act a decade earlier, the 2008 financial crisis would still have occurred.
5. Researchers most often choose mice when they construct transgenic cancer models, but they also use zebrafish.
7. Although we showed that the environmental impact study was flawed, the city council relied on its finding when they made the zoning decision.

## EXERCISE 3.3

1. Some believe that students cram for tests in part because they do not understand how sleep deprivation affects their cognitive performance. [Why would it be difficult to change those last two nominalizations into verbs?]
3. We suggest that Mexico's economy has improved because it has successfully promoted international tourism.

5. According to the news report, the mayor was indicted for violating campaign finance laws.
7. To evaluate how the flow rate changed, the current flow rate was compared to the original rate based on figures collected by Jordan previously. [This sentence technically has a dangling modifier, but that pattern is so common in technical prose that no reader would balk. That last clump of nominalizations is acceptable because it is a technical term.]

### EXERCISE 3.4

1. Diabetic patients may reduce their blood pressure by applying renal depressors.
3. Based on these principles, we may now attempt to formulate rules for extracting narrative information.
5. The EPA has published new guidelines for procedures to test automobile CO emissions.

### EXERCISE 4.1

1. When the mayor assumed office, she had in mind two aims: the recovery of the city's economy and the modernization of its public-transportation system. Her success in the first is demonstrated by the city's decline in unemployment and the increase in sales tax revenue. But her lack of success with the second is indicated by continuing traffic problems and bus and subway service delays. Nevertheless, she pleased the city's voters merely by promising future improvements.
3. Even though the film is billed as a comedy, both of its main characters suffer life-changing losses. When the female lead's laptop crashes, the only draft of a novel she has been writing for five years is destroyed, but this experience ultimately leads her to a more positive outlook on life. In contrast, when her romantic interest misplaces a million-dollar lottery ticket, he sinks into depression and cynicism. The different ways these characters respond to their similar situations creates the film's comic effect.

### EXERCISE 4.2

1. Except for those areas covered with ice or scorched by continual heat, the earth is covered by vegetation. Plants grow most richly in fertilized plains and river valleys, but they also grow at the edge of perpetual snow in high mountains. Dense vegetation grows in the ocean and around its edges as well as in and around lakes and swamps. Plants grow in the cracks of busy city sidewalks as well as on seemingly barren cliffs. Vegetation covered the earth before we existed and still will long after we have been swallowed up by evolutionary history.
3. Over the past decade, machine learning has emerged as a prominent subfield of computer science. It is defined by the use of sophisticated mathematical models to allow computers to perform progressively better on their assigned tasks. Machine learning differs from the older field of artificial intelligence, which focused more on modeling abstract intelligence than on applying adaptive computational methods to concrete and solvable problems. For this reason, machine learning has seen great interest from businesses of all sorts.

## EXERCISE 5.1

One can imagine different rationales for different stresses.

1. In my opinion at least, the football team's biggest weakness is their quarterback's tendency to fumble near the goal line.
3. In large colleges and universities, opportunities for faculty to work with individual students are limited.
5. College students commonly complain about teachers who assign a long final term paper and then give it a grade but no comments.
7. Our company has succeeded because we have focused not on short-term gains but on long-term growth.

## EXERCISE 5.2

1. Because the most important event in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* is Athens's catastrophic Sicilian Invasion, Thucydides devotes three-quarters of his book to setting it up. We can see how he anticipates it in how he describes the step-by-step decline in Athenian society, creating the inevitability we associate with tragic drama.
3. The Mayan civilization most likely declined in the ninth century because of both environmental and political factors. Rapid population growth and prolonged drought in this period led to severe economic distress. In addition, constant warfare and a rigid system of monarchic rule hindered the Maya's ability to respond to these circumstances. Within the century, much of the Maya's territory was almost entirely depopulated.

## EXERCISE 8.1

1. Critics must use complex and abstract terms to analyze literary texts meaningfully.
3. Most patients who go to a public clinic do not expect special treatment, because their health problems are minor and can be easily treated.
5. We can reduce the federal deficit only if we reduce federal spending.
7. So long as most taxpayers pay their taxes, the government will easily repay its debts.

## EXERCISE 8.3

1. On the other hand, some TV programming will always appeal to our most prurient interests.
3. Schools transmit more social values than do families.

## EXERCISE 9.1

1. To explain why Shakespeare had Lady Macbeth die off-stage, we must understand how the audience reacted to Macbeth's death.
3. A student's right to access his or her records generally takes precedence over an institution's desire to keep those records private, unless the student agrees to limits on those rights during registration.

5. Successful marriages vary, but trust between spouses is almost always among their positive attributes.
7. Cigarette companies no longer claim that smoking does not cause heart disease and cancer.
9. Employers have had no difficulty identifying skilled employees, even though teachers, administrators, and even newspapers continue to debate grade inflation.
11. Parents and students need to understand how serious it is to bring to school anything that looks like a weapon, because principals may require students to pass through metal detectors before entering a school building.

## EXERCISE 9.2

1. Many school systems are returning to the basics, basics that have been the foundation of education for centuries./ ...a change that is long overdue./trying to stem an ever rising drop-out rate.
3. For millennia, why we age has been a puzzle, a puzzle that only now can be answered with any certainty./ ...a situation that leads some to turn to religion and others to science./ ...fostering a hope that one day we might stop our inevitable decline into infirmity and death.

## EXERCISE 10.1

1. Those who argue stridently over small matters are unlikely to think clearly about large ones.
3. Some teachers mistake neat papers that rehash old ideas for great thoughts wrapped in impressive packaging.

## EXERCISE 10.2

1. If we invest our sweat in these projects, we must not appear to be working only for our own self-interest.
3. Throughout history, science has progressed because dedicated scientists have ignored the hostility of an uninformed public.
5. Our most ethical choices are based not on what is most convenient in the moment but on moral principles that are unchanging.

## EXERCISE 11.1

As the State Utilities Commission has authorized, **you** will have to pay ... **You** have not had to pay ..., but **you** will now pay rates that have been restructured consistent with revised state policy, which lets us base what **you** pay on what it costs us to provide you with service.

As the State Utilities Commission has authorized, **we** are charging you ... **We** have not raised rates ... but **we** are restructuring the rates now ... so that **we** can charge you for what **we** pay to provide you with service.



## EXERCISE 11.2

Your car may have a defective part that connects the suspension to the frame. If you brake hard and the plate fails, you won't be able to steer. We may also have to adjust the secondary latch on your hood because we may have misaligned it. If you don't latch the primary latch, the secondary latch might not hold the hood down. If the hood flies up while you are driving, you won't be able to see. If either of these things occurs, you could crash.

# Acknowledgments

**Front Matter:** Page v: Williams, Joseph M., "Defining Complexity." *College English*, Vol. 40, No. 6 (Feb., 1979), pp. 595–609. National Council of Teachers of English.

**Introduction:** Page 1: Orwell, George, "Politics and the English Language," *Horizon*, Vol. 13, Issue 76, pp. 252–265, GB, London: April 1946; Mandela, Nelson, Nobel Lecture, December 10, 1993; Mencken, H. L., "Literature and the School Ma'am," *Prejudices*, Fifth Series, Alfred Knopf, 1926.

**Chapter 1:** Page 6: Blair, Hugh. *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 1783; Burns, Robert, "Address to the Inco Guid, or The Rigidly Righteous," 1786; Follett, Wilson, *Modern American Usage: A Guide*. Edited and completed by Jacques Barzun et al., Hill & Wang, 1966; Ong, Walter J. "The Expanding Humanities and the Individual Scholar," *Publication of the Modern Language Association*, September 1967; Barzun, Jacques, *Simple and Direct*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975; Fowler, Henry, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*. Oxford University Press, 1926; Annan, Noel Gilroy. Lord Annan, "The Life of the Mind in British Universities Today," *American Council of Learned Societies Newsletter*, pp. 18–19, 1969; MacDonald, Dwight, "The String Untuned," *The New Yorker*, March 10, 1962; Gowers, Ernest, *The Complete Plain Words*. HMSO, 1954; Zinsser, William, *On Writing Well*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1976; Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, 1787.

**Chapter 2:** Page 23: Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (proposition 4.116). Translated by C. K. Ogden, 1922.

**Chapter 3:** Page 45: Brand, Myles, *Intending and Acting*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press/A Bradford Book, 1984; Newton, Isaac, "New Theory of Light and Colors," 1672; Matthews, P. H. "Problems of Selection in Transformational Grammar." *Journal of Linguistics* 1.01 (1965): 35–47; Nathan, Andrew J. and Tianjian Shi, "Cultural Requisites for Democracy in China: Findings from a Survey," *Daedalus*. Vol. 122, No. 2, Spring, 1993; Gilbert, John P., Bucknam McPeck, and Frederick Mosteller, "Statistics and Ethics in Surgery and Anesthesia," *Science*, pp. 684–689, 1977; Parsons, Talcott, *Essays in Sociological Theory*. Simon & Schuster, 1954.

**Chapter 5:** Page 73: Rosenberg, Steven A. M.D., Ph.D., "Observations on the Systemic Administration of Autologous Lymphokine-Activated Killer Cells and Recombinant Interleukin-2 to Patients with Metastatic Cancer." *New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol 313, No. 23; Edmundson, Mark. *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education*. Bloomsbury, USA. 2013.

**Chapter 6:** Page 98: Dewey, John, *How We Think*. 1910.

**Chapter 7:** Page 100: Marquez, Gabriel Garcia interviewed by Peter H. Stone; published as "Gabriel Garcia Marquez, The Art of Fiction," No. 69, *The Paris Review*, Winter 1981, No. 82.

**Chapter 8:** Page 112: Pearson, Hesketh, *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Personality*. London: Collins, 1942; Tannen, Deborah, *The Argument Culture*. Ballantine Books, 1999; Watson, J. D. and F. H. C. Crick, "Molecular Structure of Nucleic Acids," *Nature*, 171, April 25, 1953; Strunk, William, and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd Ed., © 1979. Reprinted and Electronically reproduced by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., New York, NY.

**Chapter 9:** Page 125: Stein, Gertrude, *Lectures in America*. Beacon Press, 1935; Hoffman, Eva, "Minor Art Offers Special Pleasures," *New York Times*, February 27, 1983.

**Chapter 10:** Page 145: Editorial Board, "Little League's Scapegoats." *The Washington Post*, 12 Feb 2015; Gibbon, Edward, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. 1776–1789; Gay, Peter, *Style in History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1974; Fallows, James, *Breaking the News*. New York, NY: Pantheon, 1996; Oates, Joyce Carol, "New Heaven and New Earth," *Saturday Review*, Nov. 4, 1972, 51–54; reprinted in *Arts and Society*, Spring-Summer 1973, 36–43; Wollstonecraft, Mary. *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. 1796; Sandel, Michael J., *Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2010.

**Chapter 11:** Page 159: Russell, Bertrand, "On Scientific Method in Philosophy." Clarendon Press, 1914; Ochs, E., and B. Schieffelin, "Planned and Unplanned Discourse," *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 12: *Discourse and Syntax*, ed. by T. Givon. New York: Academic Press, 1979; Newspaper advertisement copy, Sears, 1992; Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994; Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (proposition 4.116)." Translated by C .K. Ogden, 1922; Aronowitz, Stanley, and Henry Giroux, *Postmodern Education*. University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

**Chapter 12:** Pages 173, 179: Whitehead, Alfred North, "The Aims of Education." New York: Macmillan Co., Free Press edition, 1967.

**Appendix I:** Page 180: Stein, Gertrude, *Lectures in America*. Beacon Press, 1935; Twain, Mark. *Harper's Bazaar*, XLIV, II8–II9. Feb., 1910.

**Appendix II:** Page 197: Whitehead, Alfred North, "The Aims of Education." New York: Macmillan Co., Free Press edition, 1967; Tannen, Deborah, *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*. Ballantine Books, 1999.

# Index

## A

- Absolute words, modifying, 15
  - Abstractions as characters, 43–45
- Accept* vs. *except*, 16
- Action
  - as verbs, 26–27, 154
  - clarity and, 40
  - finding in sentence, 29–30
  - important actions as verbs, 26, 35–36
  - main characters as subjects, 25
  - revising and, 32–33, 41–42
- Adjectives
  - concision, 116
  - intensifiers, 120
- Adverbs
  - concision, 116
  - intensifiers, 120
- Affect* vs. *effect*, 16
- Affirmatives *versus* negatives, 115–116
- Aggravate* vs. *annoy*, 15
- Ambiguous modifiers, 141
- American Dialect Society, 21
- And*, beginning sentences with, 9
- Annan, Noel Gilroy, 11
- Anticipate* vs. *expect*, 15
- Anxious* vs. *eager*, 15
- APA (American Psychological Association) style, 201
- Apostrophes
  - contractions, 194
  - plurals, 194
  - possessives, 194–195
- Applied problems, 91
- Aronowitz, Stanley, 169
- As well*, 76
- Attributing sources, 206–207

## B

- Balance
  - coordinate, 145–146
  - noncoordinate, 146–148
- Barzun, Jacques, 9, 10
- Because, beginning sentences with, 9
- Begin with the topic, 155
- Bhabha, Homi, 168
- Blackmail* vs. *coerce*, 15
- Blair, Hugh, 6
- Block quotations, 203–204
- Body, coherence and, 101
- Brand, Myles, 45
- Burns, Robert, 7
- But*, 76
  - beginning sentences with, 9

## C

- Characters
  - absent, reconstructing, 42–43
  - abstractions as, 43–45
  - compound noun phrases, 53–54
  - first-person subject, 50–51
  - passive verbs and, 47–49
  - professional voice, 55–56
  - revising and, 32–33, 41–42
  - short subjects, 54–55
  - as subjects, 25, 154
- Chiasmus, 150–151
- Chicago Manual of Style, 201
- Choice, 6
- Chronological order, 105
- Churchill, Winston, 148–149
- Clarity
  - actions and, 40
  - actions as verbs, 154
  - begin with the topic, 155
  - characters as subjects, 154
  - competing interests and, 162–167
  - complexity, necessary, 168
  - complexity, salutary, 168–169
  - elegance and, 154–156
  - end on stress, 155
  - ethics, 160–170
  - framing documents, introductions, 86–87
  - gendered nouns, 161–162
  - general principle, 107–109
  - misdirection, 163–167
  - obscurity, unintended, 163
  - old before new, 155
  - opacity, 168–169
  - professional voice and, 55–56
  - shape and, 126–127
  - short before long, 136–137, 155
  - simple before complex, 155
  - subversive, 168–169
- Clauses
  - complex sentences, 181
  - compound sentences, 180
  - compound/complex sentences, 181
  - nonrestrictive, 11
- Climactic emphasis
  - chiasmus, 150–151
  - echoing salience, 150
  - suspension, 151
  - weight of words, 148–149
- Coherence, 58–59
  - faked, 68–69
  - general principle, 107–109
  - global, 101–104
  - introduction and body, 101

Coherence (*Continued*)  
 monotony, 68–69  
 paragraphs, 106–107  
 revision and, 65–66  
 sections, 102–104, 107  
 sentence model, 82  
 sentences, simple and complex, 107  
 stress, 79–81  
 subjects and topics, 63–64  
 themes, 79–81  
 topic and, 63, 64–65, 79–81, 102–103  
 the whole and, 63  
Cohesion, 58, 59–60, 63  
 flow, 59–60  
 information presentation, 60–61  
 revision and, 65–66  
 sentence model, 82  
Colon, 185–186  
Commas  
 alone, 185  
 coordinating conjunction and, 183  
 introductory elements, 187–188  
Common beliefs, 88  
Complete as modifier, 15  
Complex sentences, 180–181  
Complexity, 71  
 complex grammar, 72  
 complex meaning, 72–73  
 emphasis, 73–75  
 necessary, 168  
 salutary, 168–169  
 stress, 73–75  
Compound noun phrases, 53–54  
Compound sentences, 180–181  
Comprise vs. constitute, 15  
Conceptual problems, 89, 90  
 applied problems, 91  
 solution, 91–92  
Concision  
 adjectives, 116  
 adverbs, 116  
 doubled words, 113  
 hedges, 119  
 implication and, 114  
 inference and, 113  
 intensifiers, 120  
 metadiscourse, redundant, 118  
 negatives *versus* affirmatives, 115–116  
 phrases, 114–115  
 redundant categories, 113  
 redundant modifiers, 113  
 revision and, 112–117  
*versus* terseness, 121–122  
Conclusions, framing, 95–96  
Conjunctions  
 alone, 184  
 coordinating with comma, 183  
Connections, unclear, 140  
Continual vs. continuous, 15  
Contractions, 194  
Coordinate balance, 145–146  
Coordinate sections, 105

Coordinated elements  
 punctuation, 192–194  
Coordinating conjunctions  
 comma and, 183  
 period and, 184  
 semicolon and, 184  
Coordination  
 endings, long, 134–135  
 grammatical, 138–139  
 rhetorical, 140  
 unclear connections, 140  
Correctness  
 confused words, 15–16  
 elegant options, 12–13  
 gender and style, 16–21  
 hobgoblins, 13–15  
 invented rules (folklore), 8–12  
 pronouns, 17–21  
 real rules, 8  
 rules observation, 6–7  
 social rules, 8  
Crick, F.H.C., 119  
Criteria vs. criterion, 16

## D

Dangling modifiers, 141  
Dash, 186  
Data vs. datum, 16  
Dewey, John, 86  
Dickenson, Emily, 100–101  
Discrete vs. discreet, 16  
Disinterested vs. uninterested, 15  
Doubled words, concision and, 113

## E

Echoing salience, 150  
Edmundson, Mark, 74  
Einstein, Albert, 170  
Elegance, 12–13  
 actions as verbs, 154  
 balance, 145–148  
 begin with the topic, 155  
 characters as subjects, 154  
 clarity and, 154–156  
 climactic, 148–151  
 end on stress, 155  
 extravagant, 151–152  
 old before new, 155  
 sentence length and rhythm, 154  
 short before long, 155  
 simple before complex, 155  
Emphasis, 73–75  
*but*, 76  
*it* shift, 76  
*not only*, 76  
 passives, 76  
 pronoun substitution, 77  
*there* shift, 76  
*as well*, 76  
*what* shift, 76

End on stress, 155  
 End punctuation, 182–185  
 Endings, long, 132  
   clauses to modifying phrases, 132–134  
   coordination, 134–135, 138–140  
   cutting, 132  
   depending clauses to independent sentences, 132  
   modifier problems, 141  
*Enormity* vs. *enormous*, 15  
 Ethics  
   competing interests, 162–167  
   complexity, 168–169  
   gender-inclusive language, 161–162  
   golden rule, 161  
   misdirection, 163–167  
   obscurity, unintended, 163  
   readers' responsibilities, 160–161  
   silver rule, 165  
   values, 161–162  
   writers' responsibilities, 160–161  
 Events, 88  
*Except* vs. *accept*, 16  
 Exclamation point alone, 182  
 Extravagant elegance, 151–152

## F

Fairy tales *versus* serious writing, 27–28  
 Faked coherence, 68–69  
 Fallows, James, 151  
*Famous* vs. *notorious*, 16  
*Fewer* vs. *less*, 11  
*Final* as modifier, 15  
*Finalize* vs. *finish*, 14  
 First-person subject  
   metadiscourse and, 51–52  
   passive voice and, 50–51  
*Flaunt* vs. *flout*, 15  
 Flow, cohesion and, 59–60  
 Folklore (invented rules), 9–12  
 Follett, Wilson, 9  
*Fortuitous* vs. *fortunate*, 15  
 Fowler, Henry and Francis, 10–11  
 Fragments, intended, 186–187  
 Framing documents  
   conclusions, 95–96  
   introductions, 86–87  
   templated writing, 109  
 Framing sections, 100–101  
   coherence, themes and, 101–104  
 Franklin, Benjamin, 58  
 Free modifiers, 134  
*Fulsome* vs. *much*, 16

## G

Gay, Peter, 150  
 Gendered nouns, 16–17  
   ethics and, 161–162  
 Genres, 86  
 Gerunds, 29

Gibbon, Edward, 149  
 Gilbert, John P., 51  
 Global coherence, 101–104  
 Gowers, Sir Ernest, 12  
 Grammar  
   complex, 72  
   real rules, 8  
 Grammatical constructions, 47  
 Grammatical coordination, 138–139  
 Grammatical sentences, 181–182

## H

Hedges, concision and, 120  
 Historical background, 88  
 Hodges, Albert, 177  
 Hoffman, Eva, 135  
 Hofmann, Hans, 112  
*Hopefully*, 14  
 Hugo, Victor, 92

## I

I/We, passive voice and, 50–51  
*Impact* as verb, 14  
 Implication, concision and, 114  
*Imply* vs. *infer*, 16  
 Inference, concision and, 113  
 Information, familiar, 60–61  
 Intensifiers, concision and, 120  
 Intention, abstraction and, 45  
 Introductions  
   framing, 86–87  
   preludes, 92–94  
   problems, 86–87, 89–92  
   revision, 94–95  
   shared context, 88, 93  
   solutions, 93  
   topic, 86–87  
 Introductory elements, punctuation, 187–189  
 Introductory phrases, revising and, 41  
 Invented rules, 8–9  
   elegant options, 12–13  
   folklore, 9–12  
*Irregardless* vs. *regardless* or *irrespective*, 15  
*It* shift, 76

## J

Johnson, Samuel, 145

## L

*Like* vs. *as*, 14  
 Lincoln, Abraham  
   First Inaugural Address, 172–173  
   Second Inaugural Address, 172–178  
 Literature review, 88  
 Logic, organization and, 105  
 Long endings. *See* endings, long  
 Long openings. *See* openings, long  
 Loose commentary, punctuation, 190–192

**M**

MacDonald, Dwight, 12  
 Matthews, P.H., 51  
 McPeck, Bucknam, 51  
 Meaning, complex, 72–73  
 Metadiscourse, 51–52  
   beginning sentences, 66–67  
   redundant, concision and, 118  
   sources, 118  
   topic, 118  
 Misdirection, 163–167  
 MLA (Modern Language Association) style, 201  
 Modifiers  
   ambiguous, 141  
   dangling, 141  
   free, 134  
   redundant, 113  
   resumptive, 132–133  
   summative, 133–134  
 Monotony, alleged, 67–68  
*More*, modifying, 15  
 Mosteller, Frederick, 51  
*Much* vs. *fulsome*, 16

**N**

Nathan, Andrew J., 51  
 Negatives *versus* affirmatives, 115–116  
 Newton, Sir Isaac, 50  
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 23  
 Nominalizations  
   centralization, 54–55  
   empty verbs, 33–35  
   *The fact that*, 38  
   object, 38  
   prepositions, 35  
   revisions, 33–35  
   short subject to previous sentence, 37–38  
   useful, 37–38  
 Noncoordinate balance, 146–148  
*None*, singular verb with, 13  
 Nonrestrictive clauses, 11  
*Not only*, 76  
 Notetaking, sources and, 198–200  
 Nouns, compound noun phrases, 53–54

**O**

Oates, Joyce Carol, 152  
 Object, long openings, 128–130  
 Obscurity, unintended, 163  
 Ochs, E., 163  
 Old before new, 60–62, 155  
 Ong, Walter, 9, 11  
 Openings, long  
   object, 128–130  
   subject, 127–128  
   verb, 128–130  
 Organization, 104  
   chronological order, 105  
   coordinate sections, 105  
   logic, 105

**P**

Paragraph coherence, 106–107  
 Parallelism, 136  
 Paraphrasing sources, 203  
 Parentheses, 186  
 Passive verbs  
   *versus* active, 48–49  
   characters and, 47–49  
   first-person subjects and, 50–51  
   flow and, 59  
   I/We and, 50–51  
 Passives, emphasis and, 76  
*Perfect* as modifier, 15  
 Period  
   alone, 182  
   coordinating conjunction and, 184  
*Phenomena* vs. *phenomenon*, 16  
 Phrases, concision and, 114–115  
 Plagiarism, 171  
   sources and, 197–198  
 Plato, 85  
 Plurals, 194  
 Point-first principle, 126–127  
 Possessives, 194–195  
 Practical problems, 89, 90–91  
 Preludes, 92–94, 93  
 Prepositions ending sentences, 12–13  
*Principal* vs. *principle*, 16  
 Problems, 93  
   applied, 91  
   conceptual, 89, 90–91  
   condition, 89  
   intolerable consequences, 89  
   introduction and, 86–87  
   practical, 89, 90  
   situation, 89  
   solutions, 91–92, 93  
*Proceed* vs. *precede*, 16  
 Professional voice, 55–56  
 Pronouns  
   first-person plural, 18  
   future of, 21  
   gender and agreement, 17–18  
   inclusive options, 18–20  
   masculine and feminine, 18  
   non-binary, 20–21  
   substitution, emphasis, 77  
 Punctuation  
   apostrophes, 194–195  
   colon, 185–186  
   commas, 183, 185  
   complex sentences, 180–181  
   compound sentences, 180–181  
   conjunctions, 183, 184  
   coordinated elements, 192–194  
   coordinating conjunction, 183, 184  
   dash, 186  
   end punctuation, 182–185  
   exclamation point, 182  
   fragments, intended, 186–187  
   grammatical sentences, 181–182

interruptions, 190  
 introductory elements, 187–189  
 loose commentary, 190–192  
 middles, 189–192  
 parentheses, 186  
 period, 182, 184  
 punctuated sentences, 181–182  
 question mark, 182  
 semicolon, 182–183, 184  
 simple sentences, 180–181

## Q

Question mark alone, 182  
*Quite*, modifying, 15  
 Quotations  
   block quotations, 203–204  
   drop in, 204–205  
   weaving in, 205–206  
   words from source, 206

## R

Real rules, grammar, 8  
 Redundancies  
   categories, 113  
   metadiscourse, 118  
   modifiers, 113  
 Relevance, 104–106  
 Resumptive modifiers, 132–133  
 Revision  
   actions, 41–42  
   characters, 41–42  
   clauses to modifying phrases, 132–134  
   coherence and, 65–66  
   cohesion and, 65–66  
   concision, 112–117  
   dependent clauses to independent sentences, 132  
   endings, long, 131–135  
   familiarity, 32  
   introductions, 94–95  
   introductory phrases, 41  
   long openings, 127–130  
   nominalizations, 33–35  
   procedures for sentences, 32–33  
   stress, syntactic devices, 76–77  
   stress, tactical, 75  
 Rhetorical coordination, 140  
 Rhythm, sentence length and, 154  
 Rules  
   invented, 8–9  
   invented rules, 9–12  
   real rules, 8  
   social rules, 8  
 Russell, Bertrand, 159

## S

Schieffelin, B., 163  
 Section coherence, 102–104, 107  
 Semicolon  
   alone, 182–183  
   coordinating conjunction and, 184  
   introductory elements, 188

Sentences  
   beginning, 66–67  
   complex, 180–181  
   compound, 180–181  
   fragments, intended, 186–187  
   grammatical, 181–182  
   length, elegance and, 154  
   length, shape, 125–126  
   long, troubleshooting, 138–141  
   monotony, alleged, 67–68  
   punctuated, 181–182  
   rhythm and, 154  
   simple, 180–181  
 Shakespeare, William, 22, 71  
 Shape, 125  
   clear writing, 126–127  
   endings, long, 131–135  
   grammatical elements of a sentence, 126  
   logical elements of a sentence, 126  
   long sentence troubleshooting, 138–141  
   openings, long, 127–130  
   parallelism, 136  
   point-first principle, 126–127  
   sentence length, 125–126  
   short-before-long principle, 136–137

Shared context, 93  
   introduction, 88  
   literature review, 88  
 Shaw, George Bernard, 111  
 Shi, Tianjian, 51  
 Short before long, 136–137, 155  
 Simple before complex, 155  
 Simple sentences, 180–181  
*Simplistic* vs *simple*, 16  
 Social rules, usage, 8  
 Solutions to problems, 91–92, 93  
 Sources  
   APA (American Psychological Association)  
     style, 201  
   articles, 199  
   attributions, 206–207  
   block quotations, 203–204  
   books, 199  
   Chicago Manual of Style, 201  
   citing, 200–201  
   how much to use, 201–202  
   metadiscourse and, 118  
   MLA (Modern Language Association) style, 201  
   notetaking and, 198–200  
   paraphrasing, 199, 203  
   plagiarism and, 197–198  
   quotation mark punctuation, 200  
   quotations, 199, 204–206  
   summaries, 202–203  
   words from, 206  
 Split infinitives, 12  
 Standard English  
   authority, 6–7  
   invented rules, 8–9  
   real rules, 8  
   social rules, 8  
 Stein, Gertrude, 125, 180



*Strata* vs. *stratum*, 16

Stress, 73–75  
coherence and, 79–81  
revision, 75–77

Strunk and White *The Elements of Style*,  
121–122

Subject  
first-person, passive voice and, 50–51  
long-openings, 127–128  
simple subjects, 24  
short subjects, 54–55  
topic and, 63–64  
whole subjects, 24

Subversive clarity, 168–169

Summarizing sources, 202–203

Summative modifiers, 133–134

Suspension, 151

Syntactic devices for revision, 76–77

## T

Tactical revisions, 75

Tannen, Deborah, 116

Templated writing, 109

Terseness, 121–122

*That*, 10–11

*The Elements of Style* (Strunk and White), 121–122

Themes

coherence and, 79–81

preludes, 92–94

*There* shift, 76

Topics, 63–65

coherence and, 64–65, 79–81, 102–103

introduction, 86–87

metadiscourse and, 118

## U

*Unique* as modifier, 15

Usage social rules, 8

## V

Verbs, 24

actions as, 26–27, 154

active *versus* passive, 48–49

*impact* as, 14

intensifiers, 120

long openings, 128–130

passive, characters and, 47–49

*Very*, modifying, 15

Voice, emphasis and, 74

## W

Watson, J.D., 119

Weight of words, 148–149

*What* shift, 76

*Which* vs. *that*, 10–11

*While* vs. *since*, 11–12

Whitehead, Alfred North, 171, 197

*Who* vs. *whom*, 13

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 23, 168

Wollstonecraft, Mary, 154

Writing

fairy tails, 27–28

templated, 109

testing for clarity, 28–29

## Z

Zinsser, William, 13