Ten Principles for Writing Clearly

1. Distinguish real grammatical rules from folklore.
2. Use subjects to name the characters in your story.
3. Use verbs to name their important actions.
4. Open your sentences with familiar units of information.
5. Begin sentences constituting a passage with consistent topic/subjects.
6. Get to the main verb quickly:
    - Avoid long introductory phrases and clauses.
    - Avoid long abstract subjects.
    - Avoid interrupting the subject-verb connection.
7. Push new, complex units of information to the end of the sentence.
8. Be concise:
    - Cut meaningless and repeated words and obvious implications.
    - Put the meaning of phrases into one or two words.
    - Prefer affirmative sentences to negative ones.
9. Control sprawl.
    - Don't tack more than one subordinate clause onto another.
    - Extend a sentence with resumptive, summative, and free modifiers.
    - Extend a sentence with coordinate structures after verbs.
10. Above all, write to others as you would have others write to you.

STYLE
The Basics of Clarity and Grace

Joseph M. Williams
The University of Chicago

Longman

5

Cohesion and Coherence

*If he would inform, he must advance regularly from Things
known to things unknown, distinctly without Confusion, and
the lower he begins the better. 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

CLARITY VERSUS COHERENCE

We've discussed clarity as if we could achieve it by mechanically mapping characters and actions onto subjects and verbs. But for a whole passage to seem clear, readers need more than individually clear sentences. These two passages, for example, say much the same thing, but they feel different:

1a. Since the discovery that one factor of its development might be genetic, great strides in the early and accurate diagnosis of Alzheimer's have been made in recent years. 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. 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. An apparently healthy person could be devastated by such an early diagnosis at that point.

✓1b. In recent years, though researchers have have made great strides in the early and accurate diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, those better diagnoses have raised a new problem in regard to informing those at risk. Not too long ago, when a physicians examined an older patient who seemed out of touch with reality, she had to guess whether that person had Alzheimer's or was 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 otherwise healthy person.

The first passage feels choppy, even disorganized. The second feels more cohesive and coherent.

Like the word *clarity*, however, the words *choppy* and *disorganized* refer not to what is on the page, but to how what is on the page makes us *feel*. What is it about the words in (1a) that makes us feel that it is unfocused; what makes (1b) feel more cohesive and coherent? We base judgments like that on two aspects of word order:

- We judge sequences of sentences to be *cohesive*, depending on how each sentence ends and the next one begins.
- We judge a whole passage to be *coherent*, depending on how all the sentences in a passage cumulatively begin.

Once you understand how we make those two judgments, you can diagnose and revise your sentences so that your readers will judge them to be not just individually clear, but collectively both cohesive and coherent.

COHESION: A SENSE OF FLOW

In Lesson 4, we devoted a few pages (46–52) to that familiar advice, "Avoid passives." If we always did, we would choose the active verb in sentence (2a) below over the passive in (2b):

> 2a. The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble CREATES_active a black hole.
> 2b. A black hole IS CREATED_passive by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.

But we might choose otherwise if we wanted to put one of those sentences between these two:

> [1]Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. [2a/b][   ]. [3]So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

Here's the active sentence there:

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

And here's the passive:

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

Our sense of "flow" should call not for (2a), the sentence with the active verb, but for (2b), the one with the passive.

The reason is clear: The last four words of the first sentence introduce an important character—*black holes in space:*

> [1]Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying **black holes in space** . . .

If we follow it with (2a), the first concepts we hit in that sentence are collapsed stars and marbles, information that seems to come out of nowhere:

> [1] . . . universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. [2a]**The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble** creates a black hole.

But if we follow sentence (1) with (2b), the sentence with the passive verb, we make a better connection between those two sentences, because now the first words we hit in (2b) pick up on words we just read at the end of (1):

> [1] . . . studying **black holes in space.** [2b]**A black hole** is created_passive by the collapse of . . .

Note also that the passive lets us put at the *end* of sentence (2b) words that connect it to the *beginning* of sentence (3):

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

> *Here's the point:* We feel one sentence is cohesive with the next when we see at the beginning of a second sentence information that appeared toward the end of the previous one. That's what creates our experience of "flow." And in fact, that's the main reason we have the passive in the language in the first place: to arrange sentences so that they flow from one to the next.

The First Principle of Cohesion: Old-to-New

That principle of reading suggests two principles of writing and revision that are mirror images of each other. The first is this:

1. Begin sentences with information familiar to your readers.

Readers get that familiar information from two sources: First, they remember information from the sentence or two before the one they are reading. That's why sentence (2b) about black holes coheres with (1) and why (3) coheres with (2b):

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

Second, readers bring to a sentence general knowledge of its subject. We would not have been surprised, for example, if sentence (3) in that series about black holes had begun like this:

1b. . . . changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

3. **Astronomers have recently reported,** for example, that . . .

The word *Astronomers* did not appear in the previous sentence, but since we are reading about space, we shouldn't be surprised by a reference to them.

The second principle is the flip side of the first:

2. End sentences with information readers cannot anticipate.

Whatever is familiar and simple is easier to understand than what is new and complicated, and readers always prefer to read what is easy before they read what is hard.

It is easier to see how those two principles work—or don't—in the writing of others than in your own, because after

you've worked on your own writing for a while, it all seems old—to you. But hard as it is to distinguish old from new in your own writing, you have to try, because readers want to begin sentences with information that is familiar to *them*, and only then move on to information that is new.

> ***Here's the point:*** In every *sequence* of sentences you write, you have to balance principles that make individual sentences clear and principles that make a series of them cohesive. *But in that tradeoff, you must give priority to helping readers create a sense of cohesive flow.* You create that sense of flow by opening sentences with information that readers are familiar with. Fortunately, this principle about old and new information cooperates with the principle of characters as subjects. Once you mention your characters, they become familiar information to your readers. So when you regularly get characters up front, you also get up-front familiar information.

COHERENCE: A SENSE OF THE WHOLE

When you create cohesive flow, you take the first of two steps toward helping readers think your prose hangs together. But they must feel that your writing is not only cohesive but *coherent*, a quality different from cohesion. It's easy to confuse the words *cohesion* and *coherence*, because they sound so much alike.

- Think of *cohesion* as the experience of seeing pairs of sentences fit neatly together, the way two Lego® pieces do.

- Think of *coherence* as the experience of recognizing what all the sentences in a piece of writing add up to, the way lots of Lego® pieces add up to a building, bridge, or boat.

In ordinary prose, that larger whole usually consists of some point or claim along with all the other sentences that support it.

This next passage, for example, has great cohesive "flow," because we move from the end of each 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 tanklike 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 me and my analyst.

Though we connect each sentence to the one before and after, the passage is incoherent. (It was created by six different writers, one of whom wrote the first sentence, with the other five sequentially adding one sentence to fit just the immediately preceding one.)

Here's the principle of coherence briefly stated: Readers judge a passage to be coherent when the words beginning each sentence in it *cumulatively* constitute a limited and related *set* of words that tell us what a passage is about. Those words are usually subjects of sentences, but not always. (There is a second principle that we will discuss in the next lesson.)

Grammatical and Psychological Subjects

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

1. the "doer" of the action.
2. what a sentence is "about."

In Lessons 3 and 4, we saw why that first definition is not reliable.

Also flawed is that second schoolbook definition: "A subject is what a sentence is about," because often, the subject of a sentence does not state its topic; that function can be performed by other parts. For example:

- The subject of this next sentence is *it*, but its topic (boldfaced) is *your claims*, the object of the preposition *for:*

  It is impossible for **your claims** to be proved conclusively.

- The subject of this next sentence is *I*, but its topic is *these questions*, the object of *to.*

  In regard to **these questions,** I believe there is a need for more research.

- The subject of this next sentence is *it*, but its topic is *our proposals*, the subject of a verb in a subordinate clause.

  It is likely that **our proposals** will be accepted.

- The subject of this next sentence is *no one*, but its topic is *results like these*, a direct object shifted to the front for emphasis.

  Results like these *no one* could have predicted.

> ***Here's the point:***   We use the term *topic* to mean what a sentence is "about," but that topic is not always its grammatical subject. *But we expect it to be.* We judge writing to be clear and direct when we quickly see subjects and topics in the same words.

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

- the topics of individual sentences and clauses.
- how the topics in a whole passage constitute a related set of concepts.

How does this passage strike you?

1a.   The particular ideas toward the beginning of sentences define what a passage is "about" for a reader. Moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view is made possible by a sequence of topics that seem to constitute a limited set of related ideas. A seeming absence of context for each sentence is one consequence of making random shifts in topics. Feelings of dislocation, disorientation, and lack of focus in a passage occur when that happens.

Most readers find that passage close to incoherent, because its string of topics is inconsistent and diffuse; they do not focus our attention on a limited set of related ideas:

The particular ideas toward the beginning of sentences . . .

Moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of . . .

A seeming absence of context for each sentence . . .

Feelings of dislocation, disorientation, and lack of focus . . .

Now compare the topic/subjects in this passage:

Readers look for the topics of sentences to tell them what a whole passage is "about." If **they** feel that its sequence of topics focuses on a limited set of related topics, then **they** will feel they are moving through that passage from a cumulatively coherent point of view. But if **topics** seem to shift randomly, then **readers** have to begin each sentence from no coherent point of view, and when that happens, **they** feel dislocated, disoriented, and the **passage** seems out of focus.

The subject/topics in that passage focus on just two concepts: *topics* and *readers,* and so we judge that passage to be more focused, more *coherent.*

The Difficult Craft of Beginning a Sentence Well

It's hard to begin a sentence well, because in its first few words you may have to juggle several elements that keep your readers from getting to its topic/subject. It's called *throat-clearing.*

Throat-clearing typically begins with metadiscourse that connects a sentence to the previous one, with transitions such as *and, but, 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 *politically speaking:*

And therefore, politically speaking . . .

Then we can indicate time, place, or manner:

And therefore, politically speaking, in Eastern states since 1980 . . .

Only then do we get to the topic/subject:

And, therefore, politically speaking, in Eastern states since 1980, **acid rain** has become a serious problem.

When you open several sentences with that kind of "throat-clearing," your readers have a hard time seeing not just what individual sentences are "about," but the cumulative focus of a whole passage. When you find a sentence with several words before its subject/topic, revise:

✓ Since 1980, therefore, **acid rain** has become a serious political problem in Eastern states.

Diagnosis, Analysis, and Revision

Here's how to diagnose, analyze, and revise your writing to make it coherent.

1. Diagnose:

   a. Underline the first seven or eight words of every sentence in a passage.

   b. If you can, underline the first five or six words of every clause, both subordinate and main.

2. Analyze:

   a. Have you underlined words that constitute a relatively small set of related ideas? Even if *you* see connections among them, think hard about whether your readers will.

   b. Do those words name your most important characters, real or abstract?

   c. Give the passage a title. Its words are likely to identify what should be the topics of most of the sentences.

3. Revise:

   a. In most of your sentences, use subjects to name topics.

   b. Put those subjects close to the beginning of your sentences. Avoid opening sentences with long introductory clauses or phrases.

Here's the point: We can integrate these principles about old and new and a consistent topic string with the principles about characters as subjects and actions as verbs:

Fixed	Topic	
Variable	Short, simple, familiar, consistent	Long, complex, new
Fixed	Subject	Verb	——
Variable	Character	Action	——

When you create a sequence of subjects out of a limited set of characters, real or abstract, you create a sequence of topics that your readers will think is consistent and therefore coherent.