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

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Lesson

6

Emphasis

In the end is my beginning.
—T. S. ELIOT

CLARITY IN EMPHASIS

If you consistently write sentences with short subject/topics that name a few central characters and then join them to strong verbs, you'll likely get the rest of the sentence right, and in the process create a passage that seems both cohesive and coherent. But if the first few words of a sentence are important, so are the last few, because how you end a sentence determines how readers judge both its clarity and its strength. In this lesson, we address clarity first, then emphasis, then how emphasis contributes to a kind of coherence that is even more global than the coherence we gain from consistent topics.

Clarity

As we've seen, when readers get up momentum in the first few words of a sentence, they can more easily get through complicated material that follows. Compare:

1a. A sociometric and actuarial analysis of Social Security revenues and disbursements for the last six decades to determine changes in projecting deficits is the subject of this study.

✓1b. In this study, we analyze Social Security's revenues and disbursements for the last six decades, using sociometric and actuarial criteria to determine changes in projecting deficits.

As we start (1a), we must not only struggle with technical terms, but read a 23-word subject before we get to a verb. In (1b), we go through sixteen words before we hit a term that might slow us up, and by that point we have enough momentum to carry us through the complexity to the end. In short, in (1a), we hit the complexity—syntactic and semantic—at the beginning; in (1b), we don't hit complexity until near the end, where we can handle it better.

There are two kinds of complexity.

Complex Grammar Which of these two sentences do you prefer?

2a. Lincoln's claim that the war was God's punishment of both North and South for slavery appears in the last part of the speech.

✓2b. In the last part of his speech, Lincoln claims that God gave the war to both North and South as a punishment for slavery.

Most of us dislike (2a) because it begins with a complex subject. We prefer (2b) because it begins simply and moves toward complexity.

Complex Terms Readers also have a problem with unfamiliar technical terms. Compare:

3a. The role of calcium blocker drugs in the control of cardiac irregularity can be seen through an understanding of the role of calcium in the activation of muscle groups. The regulatory proteins actin, myosin, tropomyosin, and troponin make up the sarcomere, the basic unit of muscle contraction. ATPase, the energy-producing 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 influences the contraction of muscles 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, myosin, tropomyosin, and troponin. Muscles contract when the protein in the thin filament, actin, interacts with the protein in the thick filament, the energy-producing or ATPase protein myosin . . .

Both passages use the same technical terms, but (3b) is clearer to those who know nothing about muscle chemistry.

Those passages differ in two ways. First, information that is implicit in (3a) is stated explicitly in (3b):

3a. . . . and troponin make up the sarcomere, the basic unit of muscle contraction. Its thick filament is made up of . . .

✓3b. The basic unit of muscle contraction is the sarcomere. It has two filaments, one thick and one thin . . .

More important, I moved the technical terms at the beginning of the sentences in (3a) to the end of the sentences in (3b). Here in (3a) its technical terms are boldfaced; note that almost all are at the beginning of their sentences:

3a. The role of **calcium blocker drugs** in the control of **cardiac irregularity** can be seen through an understanding of the role of calcium in the activation of muscle groups.

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

ATPase, the energy-producing 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.

These principles apply to prose intended even for professional readers. In this next passage from the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the writer deliberately constructs the second sentence to get a new technical term at its end (introduced by metadiscourse):

> 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 use the end of your sentences to communicate two kinds of difficulty:

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

THE NUANCES OF EMPHASIS AND STRESS

In the last lesson, we said that an important position in the *psychological* geography of a sentence is its first few words, because they announce the topic of a sentence, its psychological subject (see pp. 59–65). Its other important position is its last few words. You can sense their role when you hear your voice rise and stress one syllable more strongly than you do the others:

. . . more strongly than you do the ó- -thers.

We have the same experience when reading silently. We'll call this climactic part of a sentence its stress and add it to our last box.

Fixed	Topic		Stress
Variable	Short, simple, familiar, consistent		New, long, complex
Fixed	Subject	Verb	———
Variable	Character	Action	———

How you manage the words in that stress position helps establish the voice readers hear through your prose.

Compare these passages. One was written to blame an American president for being weak with Russia on arms control. The other is my revision; it seems to blame Russia. You can tell which is which if you thump your finger as you read the different boldface words at the ends of the sentences:

1a. The administration has blurred an issue central to arms control, **the issue of verification.** Irresponsible charges, innuendo, and leaks have submerged **serious problems with Soviet compliance.** The objective, instead, should be not to exploit these concerns in order to further poison our relations, repudiate existing agreements, or, worse still, terminate arms control altogether, but to **insist on compliance and clarify questionable Soviet behavior.**

1b. The issue of verification—so central to arms control—has been **blurred by the administration.** Serious problems with Soviet compliance have been submerged in **irresponsible charges, innuendo, and leaks.** The objective, instead, should be to clarify questionable Soviet behavior and insist on compliance—not to exploit these concerns in order to **further poison our relations, repudiate existing agreements, or, worse still, terminate arms control altogether.**

> ***Here's the point:*** Just as we look at the first few words of your sentences for coherence, we look at the last few words for rhetorical emphasis. We assign emphasis to words we hear under this final stress, and what we hear emphasized, we expect to be significant.

Managing Endings for Emphasis

Here are some ways to get emphasis on words that deserve it.

Three Tactical Revisions

1. Trim the end.

   Some 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 drop everything after *behavior:*

   ✓ Some sociobiologists claim that our genes **control our social behavior.**

2. Shift peripheral ideas to the left.

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

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

   Particularly avoid ending with anticlimactic metadiscourse:

   Job opportunities are getting better in computer programming, **it must be remembered.**

   ✓ **It must be remembered** that job opportunities in computer programming are getting better.

3. Shift new information to the right.
   A more common way to manage stress is by moving new information to the end of a sentence.

   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

1. Passives (for the last time)
   A passive verb lets you flip a subject and object. Compare these next two sentences. To stress the concept of genes influencing behavior, we revise the active verb into a passive to get that idea closer to the stress position:

   Some sociobiologists claim that **our genes** influence$_{\text{active}}$ aspects of behavior that we think are learned. **Our genes,** for example, seem to determine . . .

   ✓Some sociobiologists claim that aspects of behavior that we think are learned are in fact influenced$_{\text{passive}}$ **by our genes. Our genes,** for example, seem to determine . . .

2. *There*
   Some editors discourage *there is/there are* constructions, but if you avoid them entirely, you lose a device that lets you shift a phrase toward the end of its sentence and thereby stress it. Compare:

   Several syntactic devices let you manage where in a sentence you locate units of new information.

   ✓**There are** several syntactic devices that let you manage where in a sentence you locate units of new information.

   Experienced writers regularly use *there* at the beginning of a paragraph to introduce concepts that they develop in sentences that follow.

3. *What-shift*
   This is another device that shifts a part of the sentence to the right:

   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 you have a subject consisting of a long noun clause, you can move it to the end of the sentence and start with an *it:*

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

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

   The cost of these five devices is a few extra words, so use them sparingly.

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

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

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

   Unless you have 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. Repeated words and pronoun substitution
   This is a fine point: A sentence can end flatly if you repeat at its end a word used just a few words before, because the voice we hear in our mind's ear drops off at the end of a sentence. You can hear that drop if you

read aloud this sentence and the previous two sentences. To avoid that kind of flatness, rewrite or use a pronoun instead of repeating the word at the end of the sentence. For example:

> A sentence will seem to end flatly if you use a word at its end 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*.

Topics, Stress, and Themes

There is one more function that the stress of certain sentences performs, one that is important in helping us sense the coherence of a whole passage. 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 do not open from any consistent point of view. After you read this passage, skim the boldfaced topics:

1a. **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 passage to make the topics more consistent, we make it more coherent:

✓1b. In recent years, though **researchers** 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 most at risk. 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, **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.

Those topics now focus on researcher/physicians and testing.

But I made another revision that is just as important. I revised the *first* sentence so that its end stressed those words expressing the particular concepts that the rest of the paragraph would develop:

> In recent years, though researchers 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 most at risk.**

We can call those key words that run through a passage its *themes.*

Look at the passage (next page) again to see how these themes run through it:

- Look first at just the boldfaced words; they are all associated with "testing."
- Then look at the italicized words; they all refer to concepts associated with Alzheimer's.
- Then look at the capitalized words; they all have to do with a new problem.

✓1b. In recent years, though researchers 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 MOST AT RISK. 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, 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.

That passage now "hangs together" not for just one reason, but for three:

- It has a consistent topic string consisting of physicians and diagnosis.
- Running through it are other strings of words that focus our attention on the themes of (1) tests, (2) concepts related to Alzheimer's disease, and (3) a new problem.
- *And no less important, the opening sentence prepares us to notice those particular themes by emphasizing them in its stress position.*

And that's a third function of the stress position in a sentence that opens a passage: The stress of that opening sentence highlights themes that we want readers to notice in what follows. This principle applies not just to sentences that introduce individual paragraphs, but to sentences that introduce passages of any length: *Locate at the ends of those sentences, in their stress position, the words that announce the key concepts that you intend to develop in the rest of the passage.*

Here's the point: We depend on themes running through a passage to create a sense of coherence. You help readers identify those themes in two ways:

- Repeat them as topics of sentences, usually as subjects.
- Repeat them elsewhere in a passage, as nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

Readers are more likely to notice those themes if you state them at the end of the sentence that introduces a passage, in its stress position.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

One last point about coherence: In the paragraph about diagnosing Alzheimer's disease, I used the opening sentence not just to signal the key terms in what would follow, but to express in that opening sentence *the main point of the paragraph*, the claim that the rest of the paragraph developed, supported, explained. When we can see the main point of a paragraph, a section, or the whole piece of writing, *particularly at the end of a short segment introducing it*, we are better able to see the relevance of everything that follows.

Compare this version of the Alzheimer's paragraph with (1b) on p. 76.

1c. 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 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. The accuracy of these new tests could psychologically devastate an apparently healthy person.

If the point of that paragraph is how an early diagnosis of Alzheimer's could damage an otherwise healthy person, we are misled by the opening sentence. It sounds as if we are going to read nothing but good in early and better diagnosis, but that turns out not to be the case.

A last suggestion: When you write a title for your piece, use words that state the key themes. Those words should also be in your point sentence. Do the same thing if your paper is long enough to have section headings: Create them out of the words you use in the point sentence for each section.

> ***Here's the point:*** Every paragraph, section, and whole in a piece of writing has to have a point that the rest supports, explains, or develops. State it at the end of a short segment introducing that paragraph, section, or whole.

Lesson

7

Concision

To a Snail: If "compression is the first grace of style," you have it.
—Marianne Moore

Clarity, Grace, and Concision

You are close to clarity when you match characters and actions to subjects and verbs, and closer yet when you get the right characters into topics and the right words under stress. But your readers may still think your prose is a long way from graceful if it looks 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 writer matched characters with subjects, and actions with verbs, but in too many words: Opinion is personal, so we don't need *personal,* and since this whole statement is opinion, we don't need *in my opinion*. *Think over* means *consider. Each and every* is redundant. A suggestion is by definition offered, and *not ignore* means *consider*. In other, fewer, words,

✓We should consider each suggestion.

Though not elegant, that sentence has at least style's first grace—that of compression, or as we'll call it, concision. Concision, though, is only a good beginning. We must still make our