

*Written communication has increased with email, instant messaging, blogs, wikis, and numerous other Internet services. As readers we struggle constantly to understand these communications despite enormous pressures on our time and attention. Phil Yaffe has been offering Ubiquity readers simple principles that have helped make these written communications significantly more effective. A while ago he told us about ten general principles, more recently about three acid tests, and now a single principle for good sentences.*

Peter Denning  
Editor

## How Crafty Word Order Can Instantly Improve Your Writing

by Philip Yaffe

I am usually very reticent about offering writing tips. Unless they are linked to the absolute, inescapable fundamental principles of good writing, such tips are too often poorly applied or misapplied.

There is really only a handful of fundamental writing principles. Before this extraordinary tip can be properly revealed, we need to review three of them: 1) clarity, 2) conciseness, and 3) density.

Clarity and conciseness are generally well known, density less so. However, for most writers these are just "weasel words", i.e. they seem to say something but actually say nothing.

For example, how can you know if your text is truly clear? You are far from being the best judge. After all, you wrote it so it should be clear to you, but will it be clear to your readers? Likewise, how can you know if your text is truly concise? Not by counting the words. My dictionary defines concise as "short, clear, and to the point". "Short" is only part of the definition, so by itself counting words cannot be the whole answer.

Fortunately, it is possible to give these three fundamental writing principles functional definitions, with almost mathematical rigor, so you can actually test your text. If it passes the test, you are well on your way to producing an outstanding document. If not, you need to do some serious rewriting.

- **Clarity.** For your text to truly clear, you must:
  1. Emphasize what is primary importance
  2. De-emphasize what is of secondary importance
  3. Eliminate what is of no importance
- **Conciseness.** For your text to be truly concise, you must ensure that it is:
  1. As long as necessary
  2. As short as possible
- **Density.** For your text to be truly dense, i.e. devoid of weasel words, you must ensure that it contains:
  1. Precise information
  2. Logically linked

If you are not fully conversant with these three fundamental principles of good writing, I would invite you to read two other articles available on the Web: "Fixing the Flaws in the 10 Principles of Clear Writing" (<http://www.articlesbase.com/non-fiction-articles/fixing-the-flaws-in-the-10-principles-of-clear-writing-326181.html>) and "How to Apply the Three Acid Tests of Persuasive Writing" ([www.articlesbase.com/non-fiction-articles/how-to-apply-the-three-acid-tests-of-persuasive-writing-465231.html](http://www.articlesbase.com/non-fiction-articles/how-to-apply-the-three-acid-tests-of-persuasive-writing-465231.html)), previously published in *Ubiquity* as well.

**Exceptional Tip**

Assuming you are largely conversant with these fundamental principles of good writing, I am about to reveal this remarkably exceptional tip. It is so remarkable because in one way or another it affects and advances clarity, conciseness, and density, which are basic objectives. It is also remarkable because it is very little known. Whenever I do a Web search for writing tips, it almost never occurs.

Here it is: Fully benefit from the two hotspots in each and every sentence you write.

Hotspots? Yes. You may never have noticed it, but words at the beginning and at the end of a sentence have stronger emphasis than those in the middle. Therefore, by putting important information in these key locations, you aid reader comprehension.

Here's an example to demonstrate how hotspots work. While considering the following three sentences, bear in mind that hotspots don't have equal value. In general, the one at the end of a sentence is somewhat more forceful than the one at the beginning.

**A.** Astronomers hunting for evidence of life outside of our solar system announced discovery of a new class of planets yesterday.

**B.** Yesterday astronomers hunting for evidence of life outside of our solar system announced discovery of a new class of planets.

**C.** Astronomers hunting for evidence of life outside of our solar system yesterday announced discovery of a new class of planets.

I hope you will agree that sentence A says what it has to say. But sentence B is rather better. And sentence C is best of all. Why?

In A, we see that "yesterday", the time of the announcement, is in the hotspot at the end of the sentence. However, knowing when the announcement was made is hardly as important as the announcement itself. Moving "yesterday" to the hotspot at the beginning in sentence B somewhat helps, but the time of the announcement is still very much a detail.

Sentence C puts "yesterday" in the middle, where such a minor detail belongs. This leaves the hotspots at the beginning and end free to convey truly key information.

Let's look at another example.

**A.** The national leaders met to discuss new trade relations between their two countries in the Royal Palace

**B.** In the Royal Palace the national leaders met to discuss new trade relations between their two countries.

**C.** The national leaders met in the Royal Palace to discuss new trade relations between their two countries.

Here, the disturbing minor element is the phrase "in the Royal Palace". Once again we see that moving it from the end of A to the beginning of B is an improvement. However, putting it in the middle of C is best of all.

Another important reason for using hotspots is to avoid ambiguity.

In A it is possible (but highly unlikely) to conclude that the two countries are located in the Royal Palace. However, suppose the sentence had been: "The national leaders met to discuss how best to curb incest and child abuse in the Royal Palace." Now that really does lend itself to interesting

interpretations! The correct way to write the sentence of course would be: "The national leaders met in the Royal Palace to discuss how best to curb incest and child abuse."

Now try the technique yourself. Consider the following: "BBX is an agency born with the Swedish Internet in 1996." In this sentence the date 1996 comes at the end. Rewrite it to put the date in the middle. I think you will agree that so doing makes the sentence clearer and more powerful.

We must be careful not to take the terms "beginning of the sentence" and "end of the sentence" too literally. Sentences often start or finish with a kind of explanatory phrase. At the beginning the phrase acts to introduce the main clause; at the end it acts to reinforce the main clause. But it is the main clause that must always be the focus of our interest.

For example: Having arrived late at the party, Jane immediately looked for the hostess to apologize. The main clause is "Jane immediately looked for the hostess to apologize." Likewise: The current financial difficulties are well under control, said the company's spokesman. Here the main clause is "The current financial difficulties are well under control."

Now that you see the power of this extremely important tip, from now on pay close attention to how you order your words. If you fully benefit from the two hotspots in each and every sentence you write, you will see immediate and substantial improvement in the clarity, conciseness, and density of each and every text you produce.

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