How to Speak and Write Correctly

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Chapter III

THE SENTENCE

Different Kinds–Arrangement of Words–Paragraph

A sentence is an assemblage of words so arranged as to convey a determinate sense or meaning, in other words, to express a complete thought or idea. No matter how short, it must contain one finite verb and a subject or agent to direct the action of the verb.

“Birds fly;” “Fish swim;” “Men walk;"–are sentences.

A sentence always contains two parts, something spoken about and something said about it. The word or words indicating what is spoken about form what is called the *subject* and the word or words indicating what is said about it form what is called the *predicate*.

In the sentences given, *birds*, *fish* and *men* are the subjects, while *fly*, *swim* and *walk* are the predicates.

There are three kinds of sentences, *simple*, *compound* and *complex*.

The *simple sentence* expresses a single thought and consists of one subject and one predicate, as, “Man is mortal.”

A *compound sentence* consists of two or more simple sentences of equal importance the parts of which are either expressed or understood, as, “The men work in the fields and the women work in the household,” or “The men work in the fields and the women in the household” or “The men and women work in the fields and in the household.”

A *complex sentence* consists of two or more simple sentences so combined that one depends on the other to complete its meaning; as; “When he returns, I shall go on my vacation.” Here the words, “when he returns" are dependent on the rest of the sentence for their meaning.

A *clause* is a separate part of a complex sentence, as “when he returns" in the last example.

A *phrase* consists of two or more words without a finite verb.

Without a finite verb we cannot affirm anything or convey an idea, therefore we can have no sentence.

Infinitives and participles which are the infinite parts of the verb cannot be predicates. “I looking up the street” is not a sentence, for it is not a complete action expressed. When we hear such an expression as “A dog running along the street,” we wait for something more to be added, something more affirmed about the dog, whether he bit or barked or fell dead or was run over.

Thus in every sentence there must be a finite verb to limit the subject.

When the verb is transitive, that is, when the action cannot happen without affecting something, the thing affected is called the *object*.

Thus in “Cain killed Abel” the action of the killing affected Abel. In “The cat has caught a mouse,” mouse is the object of the catching.

Arrangement of Words in a Sentence

Of course in simple sentences the natural order of arrangement is subject–verb–object. In many cases no other form is possible. Thus in the sentence “The cat has caught a mouse,” we cannot reverse it and say “The mouse has caught a cat” without destroying the meaning, and in any other form of arrangement, such as “A mouse, the cat has caught,” we feel that while it is intelligible, it is a poor way of expressing the fact and one which jars upon us more or less.

In longer sentences, however, when there are more words than what are barely necessary for subject, verb and object, we have greater freedom of arrangement and can so place the words as to give the best effect. The proper placing of words depends upon perspicuity and precision. These two combined give *style* to the structure.

Most people are familiar with Gray’s line in the immortal *Elegy*–"The ploughman homeward plods his weary way.” This line can be paraphrased to read 18 different ways. Here are a few variations:

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Homeward the ploughman plods his weary way.
The ploughman plods his weary way homeward.
Plods homeward the ploughman his weary way.
His weary way the ploughman homeward plods.
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Homeward his weary way plods the ploughman.
Plods the ploughman his weary way homeward.
His weary way the ploughman plods homeward.
His weary way homeward the ploughman plods.
The ploughman plods homeward his weary way.
The ploughman his weary way plods homeward.

and so on. It is doubtful if any of the other forms are superior to the one used by the poet. Of course his arrangement was made to comply with the rhythm and rhyme of the verse. Most of the variations depend upon the emphasis we wish to place upon the different words.

In arranging the words in an ordinary sentence we should not lose sight of the fact that the beginning and end are the important places for catching the attention of the reader. Words in these places have greater emphasis than elsewhere.

In Gray's line the general meaning conveyed is that a weary ploughman is plodding his way homeward, but according to the arrangement a very slight difference is effected in the idea. Some of the variations make us think more of the ploughman, others more of the plodding, and still others more of the weariness.

As the beginning and end of a sentence are the most important places, it naturally follows that small or insignificant words should be kept from these positions. Of the two places the end one is the more important, therefore, it really calls for the most important word in the sentence. Never commence a sentence with *And*, *But*, *Since*, *Because*, and other similar weak words and never end it with prepositions, small, weak adverbs or pronouns.

The parts of a sentence which are most closely connected with one another in meaning should be closely connected in order also. By ignoring this principle many sentences are made, if not nonsensical, really ridiculous and ludicrous. For instance: "Ten dollars reward is offered for information of any person injuring this property by order of the owner." "This monument was erected to the memory of John Jones, who was shot by his affectionate brother."

In the construction of all sentences the grammatical rules must be inviolably observed. The laws of concord, that is, the agreement of certain words, must be obeyed.

(1) The verb agrees with its subject in person and number. "I have," "Thou hast," (the pronoun *thou* is here used to illustrate the verb form, though it is almost obsolete), "He has," show the variation of the verb to agree with the subject. A singular subject calls for a singular verb, a plural subject demands a verb in the plural; as," The boy writes," "The boys write."

The agreement of a verb and its subject is often destroyed by confusing (1) collective and common nouns; (2) foreign and English nouns; (3) compound and simple subjects; (4) real and apparent subjects.

(1) A collective noun is a number of individuals or things regarded as a whole; as, *class regiment*. When the individuals or things are prominently brought forward, use a plural verb; as The class *were* distinguished for ability. When the idea of the whole as a unit is under consideration employ a singular verb; as The regiment *was* in camp. (2) It is sometimes hard for the ordinary individual to distinguish the plural from the singular in foreign nouns, therefore, he should be careful in the selection of the verb. He should look up the word and be guided accordingly. "He was an *alumnus* of Harvard." "They were *alumni* of Harvard." (3) When a sentence with one verb has two or more subjects denoting different things, connected by *and*, the verb should be plural; as, "Snow and rain *are* disagreeable." When the subjects denote the same thing and ar connected by *or* the verb should be singular; as, "The man or the woman is to blame." (4) When the same verb has more than one subject of different persons or numbers, it agrees with the most prominent in thought; as, "He, and not you, *is* wrong." "Whether he or I *am* to be blamed."

(2) Never use the past participle for the past tense nor *vice versa*. This mistake is a very common one. At every turn we hear "He done it" for "He did it." "The jar was broke" instead of broken. "He would have went" for "He would have gone," etc.

(3) The use of the verbs *shall* and *will* is a rock upon which even the best speakers come to wreck. They are interchanged recklessly. Their significance changes according as they are used with the first, second or third person. With the first person *shall* is used in direct statement to express a simple future action; as, "I shall go to the city to-morrow." With the second and third persons *shall* is used to express a determination; as, "You *shall* go to the city to-morrow," "He *shall* go to the city to-morrow."

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A very old rule regarding the uses of *shall* and *will* is thus expressed in rhyme:

In the first person simply *shall* foretells,
In *will* a threat or else a promise dwells.
Shall in the second and third does threat,
Will simply then foretells the future feat.

(4) Take special care to distinguish between the nominative and objective case. The pronouns are the only words which retain the ancient distinctive case ending for the objective. Remember that the objective case follows transitive verbs and prepositions. Don't say "The boy who I sent to see you," but "The boy whom I sent to see you." *Whom* is here the object of the transitive verb sent. Don't say "She bowed

to him and I" but "She bowed to him and me" since me is the objective case following the preposition *to* understood. "Between you and I" is a very common expression. It should be "Between you and me" since *between* is a preposition calling for the objective case.

(5) Be careful in the use of the relative pronouns *who*, *which* and *that*. Who refers only to persons; which only to things; as, "The boy who was drowned," "The umbrella which I lost." The relative *that* may refer to both persons and things; as, "The man *that* I saw." "The hat *that* I bought."

(6) Don't use the superlative degree of the adjective for the comparative; as "He is the richest of the two" for "He is the richer of the two." Other mistakes often made in this connection are (1) Using the double comparative and superlative; as, "These apples are much *more* preferable." "The most universal motive to business is gain." (2) Comparing objects which belong to dissimilar classes; as "There is no nicer *life* than a *teacher*." (3) Including objects in class to which they do not belong; as, "The fairest of her daughters, Eve." (4) Excluding an object from a class to which it does belong; as, "Caesar was braver than any ancient warrior."

(7) Don't use an adjective for an adverb or an adverb for an adjective. Don't say, "He acted nice towards me" but "He acted nicely toward me," and instead of saying "She looked *beautifully*" say "She looked *beautiful*."

(8) Place the adverb as near as possible to the word it modifies. Instead of saying, "He walked to the door quickly," say "He walked quickly to the door."

(9) Not alone be careful to distinguish between the nominative and objective cases of the pronouns, but try to avoid ambiguity in their use.

The amusing effect of disregarding the reference of pronouns is well illustrated by Burton in the following story of Billy Williams, a comic actor who thus narrates his experience in riding a horse owned by Hamblin, the manager:

"So down I goes to the stable with Tom Flynn, and told the man to put the saddle on him."

"On Tom Flynn?"

"No, on the horse. So after talking with Tom Flynn awhile I mounted him."

"What! mounted Tom Flynn?"

"No, the horse; and then I shook hands with him and rode off."

"Shook hands with the horse, Billy?"

"No, with Tom Flynn; and then I rode off up the Bowery, and who should I meet but Tom Hamblin; so I got off and told the boy to hold him by the head."

"What! hold Hamblin by the head?"

"No, the horse; and then we went and had a drink together."

"What! you and the horse?"

"No, *me* and Hamblin; and after that I mounted him again and went out of town."

"What! mounted Hamblin again?"

"No, the horse; and when I got to Burnham, who should be there but Tom Flynn,–he'd taken another horse and rode out ahead of me; so I told the hostler to tie him up."

"Tie Tom Flynn up?"

"No, the horse; and we had a drink there."

"What! you and the horse?"

"No, me and Tom Flynn."

Finding his auditors by this time in a *horse* laugh, Billy wound up with: "Now, look here,–every time I say horse, you say Hamblin, and every time I say Hamblin you say horse: I'll be hanged if I tell you any more about it."

Sentence Classification

There are two great classes of sentences according to the general principles upon which they are founded. These are termed the *loose* and the *periodic*.

In the *loose* sentence the main idea is put first, and then follow several facts in connection with it. Defoe is an author particularly noted for this kind of sentence. He starts out with a leading declaration to which he adds several attendant connections. For instance in the opening of the story of *Robinson Crusoe* we read: "I was born in the year 1632 in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull; he got a good estate by merchandise, and leaving off his trade lived afterward at York, from whence he had married my mother, whose relations were named Robinson, a very good family in the country and from I

was called Robinson Kreutznaer; but by the usual corruption of words in England, we are now called, nay, we call ourselves, and write our name Crusoe, and so my companions always called me,"

In the periodic sentence the main idea comes last and is preceded by a series of relative introductions. This kind of sentence is often introduced by such words as *that*, *if*, *since*, *because*. The following is an example:

"That through his own folly and lack of circumspection he should have been reduced to such circumstances as to be forced to become a beggar on the streets, soliciting alms from those who had formerly been the recipients of his bounty, was a sore humiliation."

On account of its name many are liable to think the *loose* sentence an undesirable form in good composition, but this should not be taken for granted. In many cases it is preferable to the periodic form.

As a general rule in speaking, as opposed to writing, the *loose* form is to be preferred, inasmuch as when the periodic is employed in discourse the listeners are apt to forget the introductory clauses before the final issue is reached.

Both kinds are freely used in composition, but in speaking, the *loose*, which makes the direct statement at the beginning, should predominate.

As to the length of sentences much depends on the nature of the composition.

However the general rule may be laid down that short sentences are preferable to long ones. The tendency of the best writers of the present day is towards short, snappy, pithy sentences which rivet the attention of the reader. They adopt as their motto *multum in parvo* (much in little) and endeavor to pack a great deal in small space. Of course the extreme of brevity is to be avoided. Sentences can be too short, too jerky, too brittle to withstand the test of criticism. The long sentence has its place and a very important one. It is indispensable in argument and often is very necessary to description and also in introducing general principles which require elaboration. In employing the long sentence the inexperienced writer should not strain after the heavy, ponderous type. Johnson and Carlyle used such a type, but remember, an ordinary mortal cannot wield the sledge hammer of a giant. Johnson and Carlyle were intellectual giants and few can hope to stand on the same literary pedestal. The tyro in composition should never seek after the heavy style. The best of all authors in the English language for style is Addison. Macaulay says: "If you wish a style learned, but not pedantic, elegant but not ostentatious, simple yet refined, you must give your days and nights to the volumes of Joseph Addison." The simplicity, apart from the beauty of Addison's writings causes us to reiterate the literary command–"Never use a big word when a little one will convey the same or a similar meaning."

Macaulay himself is an elegant stylist to imitate. He is like a clear brook kissed by the noon-day sun in the shining bed of which you can see and count the beautiful white pebbles. Goldsmith is another writer whose simplicity of style charms.

The beginner should study these writers, make their works his *vade mecum*, they have stood the test of time and there has been no improvement upon them yet, nor is there likely to be, for their writing is as perfect as it is possible to be in the English language.

Apart from their grammatical construction there can be no fixed rules for the formation of sentences. The best plan is to follow the best authors and these masters of language will guide you safely along the way.

The Paragraph

The paragraph may be defined as a group of sentences that are closely related in thought and which serve one common purpose. Not only do they preserve the sequence of the different parts into which a composition is divided, but they give a certain spice to the matter like raisins in a plum pudding. A solid page of printed matter is distasteful to the reader; it taxes the eye and tends towards the weariness of monotony, but when it is broken up into sections it loses much of its heaviness and the consequent lightness gives it charm, as it were, to capture the reader.

Paragraphs are like stepping-stones on the bed of a shallow river, which enable the foot passenger to skip with ease from one to the other until he gets across; but if the stones are placed too far apart in attempting to span the distance one is liable to miss the mark and fall in the water and flounder about until he is again able to get a foothold. 'Tis the same with written language, the reader by means of paragraphs can easily pass from one portion of connected thought to another and keep up his interest in the subject until he gets to the end.

Throughout the paragraph there must be some connection in regard to the matter under consideration,–a sentence dependency. For instance, in the same paragraph we must not speak of a house on fire and a runaway horse unless there is some connection between the two. We must not write consecutively:

"The fire raged with fierce intensity, consuming the greater part of the large building in a short time." "The horse took fright and wildly dashed down the street scattering pedestrians in all directions." These two sentences have no connection and therefore should occupy separate and distinct places. But when we say–"The fire raged with fierce intensity consuming the greater part of the large building in a short time and the horse taking fright at the flames dashed wildly down the street scattering pedestrians in all directions,"–there is a natural sequence, viz., the horse taking fright as a consequence of the flames and hence the two expressions are combined in one paragraph.

As in the case of words in sentences, the most important places in a paragraph are the beginning and the end. Accordingly the first sentence and the last should by virtue of their structure and nervous force, compel the reader's attention. It is usually advisable to make the first sentence short; the last sentence may be long or short, but in either case should be forcible. The object of the first sentence is to state a point *clearly*; the last sentence should *enforce* it.

It is a custom of good writers to make the conclusion of the paragraph a restatement or counterpart or application of the opening.

In most cases a paragraph may be regarded as the elaboration of the principal sentence. The leading thought or idea can be taken as a nucleus and around it constructed the different parts of the paragraph. Anyone can make a context for every simple sentence by asking

himself questions in reference to the sentence. Thus–"The foreman gave the order"– suggests at once several questions; “What was the order?” “to whom did he give it?” “why did he give it?” “what was the result?” etc. These questions when answered will depend upon the leading one and be an elaboration of it into a complete paragraph.

If we examine any good paragraph we shall find it made up of a number of items, each of which helps to illustrate, confirm or enforce the general thought or purpose of the paragraph. Also the transition from each item to the next is easy, natural and obvious; the items seem to come of themselves. If, on the other hand, we detect in a paragraph one or more items which have no direct bearing, or if we are unable to proceed readily from item to item, especially if we are obliged to rearrange the items before we can perceive their full significance, then we are justified in pronouncing the paragraph construction faulty.

No specific rules can be given as to the construction of paragraphs. The best advice is,–Study closely the paragraph structure of the best writers, for it is only through imitation, conscious or unconscious of the best models, that one can master the art.

The best paragraphist in the English language for the essay is Macaulay, the best model to follow for the oratorical style is Edmund Burke and for description and narration probably the greatest master of paragraph is the American Goldsmith, Washington Irving.

A paragraph is indicated in print by what is known as the indentation of the line, that is, by commencing it a space from the left margin.