

On Coherence

Two Principles of Order and Emphasis:

- 1) Whenever possible, express at the beginning of a sentence ideas already stated, referred to, implied, safely assumed, familiar, predictable, less important, readily accessible.
- 2) Express at the end of a sentence the least predictable, the newest, the most important, the most significant information, the information you almost certainly want to emphasize.

Strategies for beginning well:

- 1) To connect a new sentence to the preceding one, we use cohesive and transitional devices such as “and,” “but,” “therefore,” “as a result,” etc.
- 2) We tell our reader how to evaluate what follows with expressions such as “fortunately,” “perhaps,” “allegedly,” “for example,” etc.
- 3) We orient our reader to what follows with some preliminary context: “For the most part,” “in many ways,” “under these circumstances,” “to a certain extent,” “from a practical point of view,” “politically speaking,” etc.
- 4) We typically set the time and place of an action: “at that time,” “later,” “on May 23,” “in Europe,” etc.
- 5) And most importantly, we announce the topic of a sentence, either by naming it in the subject of a clause or by introducing it with phrases such as “in regard to,” “as for,” “turning now to,” “as far as X is concerned,” etc.

TOPICS:

The topic of a sentence or clause is what you announce that sentence or clause is about, what the rest of the sentence comments on. In most sentences, the topic is the subject.

For example: Private higher education is seriously concerned about population trends through the end of the century.

You can also put topics in introductory phrases.

For example: In regard to abortion, few issues have so excited the passions of supporters and opponents alike.

Ordinarily, though, the topics of your sentences are their subjects.

Principles of Coherent Paragraphing

Consider these two examples:

1) In this next paragraph, underlining marks topics: Particular ideas toward the beginning of each clause focus the reader's attention, so topics are crucial. Cumulatively, thematic signposts that are provided by these ideas should focus the reader's attention toward a well-defined set of connected ideas. Moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view is made possible by a sequence of topics that seem to constitute a coherent sequence of connected ideas. A lack of context for each sentence is one consequence of making the reader begin sentences with random shifts in topics. The rest of the sentence as well as whole chunks of discourse will be the objects of a reader's point of view as a result of topic announcement.

2) In this paragraph, the topics are underlined: Topics are crucial because they focus a reader's attention on particular ideas toward the beginning of each clause. Cumulatively, these ideas provide thematic signposts that should focus your reader's attention toward a well-defined set of connected ideas. If a sequence of topics seems coherent, they will move the reader through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view. But if through the paragraph the topics shift randomly, then your reader has to begin each sentence out of context, from no coherent point of view. Whatever you announce as a topic, then, will fix your reader's point of view, not just toward the rest of the sentence, but toward sequences of sentences, toward whole chunks of discourse.

Compare the sequence of topics in the original and this revised paragraph

REVISED	ORIGINAL
the topics Topics	underlining particular ideas toward the beginning of each clause
they (topics)	topics
these ideas	thematic signposts.....
a sequence of topics	Moving through a paragraph.....
we	A lack of context for each sentence
the topics	The sentence...chunks of discourse.
our reader	Whatever we announce as a topic

**The revised paragraph focuses on only two topics: topics and readers.
The original paragraph has no consistent focus.**

The principle of a coherent sequence of topics should also explain why one very long sentence after another can be cumulatively so confusing. Very long sentences don't let you clearly announce topics often enough to guide your reader through a multitude of ideas. Readers need thematic signposts to help them assemble the ideas in individual sentences and clauses into coherent and cohesive discourse.

And this reinforces the point I made about agents and actions: When you consistently arrange your sentences so that their subjects are agents and their verbs are actions, you are beginning your sentences from a consistent point of view, from the point of view of agency

Managing Subjects

A good way of controlling your subjects is to present old information before new information. When you fail to do this, your subjects will often be too long and diffuse. For example, look again at the string of topics in our pair of paragraphs about topics. In the original version, the subject/topics are long and complex, partly because they express new ideas. In the revised version, on the other hand, the subjects/topics are short, concise and specific. Because the topics express familiar information, we were able to phrase them in a few words, or even a single pronoun. If the topics of your sentences refer to ideas you have already mentioned, your subjects will be consistently short and precise, and closely connected to your verbs. And that will get your sentences off to a brisk start. Remember, as a general rule you should follow the OLD before NEW----SHORT before LONG principle of style."

There are a number of ways to make long subjects shorter, usually by switching it with another, shorter part of the sentence, a part that is shorter because it contains repeated information. Notice that in each of the following sentences, we move to the end a long subject that expresses the important, usually new information. Note too that the shorter segment we move to the beginning usually expresses older information, information that connects with something that has gone before.

Two Principles of Managing Subjects:

- 1) Put in the subject/topic of your sentences ideas that you have already mentioned, or ideas that are so familiar to your reader that your mentioning them at the beginning of a sentence will not seem abrupt.
- 2) Keep your topics consistent. That doesn't mean they have to be identical. But they should be a group of words and phrases that constitute a coherent and consistent set.

This handout is adapted from *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph Williams. For classroom use only.