Getting to the first draft

“Any tips for how to force yourself to get an outline or first draft done? Keep starting and always end up hitting a wall.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates
@tanehisicoates

Following

There is no wall. Keep writing. Write a sucky draft. You have to do it.

Ryan Pickard @whoatotally
@tanehisicoates Any tips for how to force yourself to get an outline or first draft done? Keep starting and always end up hitting a wall.

“Best. Advice. Ever. Just finish the first draft”

Lessons from last time

Avoid this:

By aiming for this:

Write steadily, in small chunks

The Writing Habit

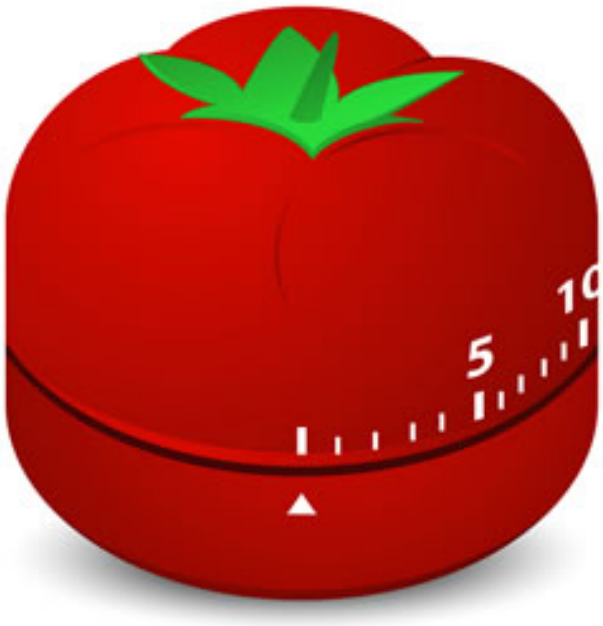
In writing, habit seems to be a much stronger force than either willpower or inspiration. Consequently there must be some little quality of fierceness until the habit pattern of a certain number of words is established. There is no possibility, in me at least, of saying, "I'll do it if I feel like it." One never feels like awaking day after day. In fact, given the smallest excuse, one will not work at all. The rest is nonsense. Perhaps there are people who can work that way, but I cannot. I must get my words down every day whether they are any good or not.

JOHN STEINBECK

https://t.co/Sp0kTMWt4Y

"Schedule no more than a 1 hour chunk, and don't aim to write more than ~200 words."

“Pomodoro Units”

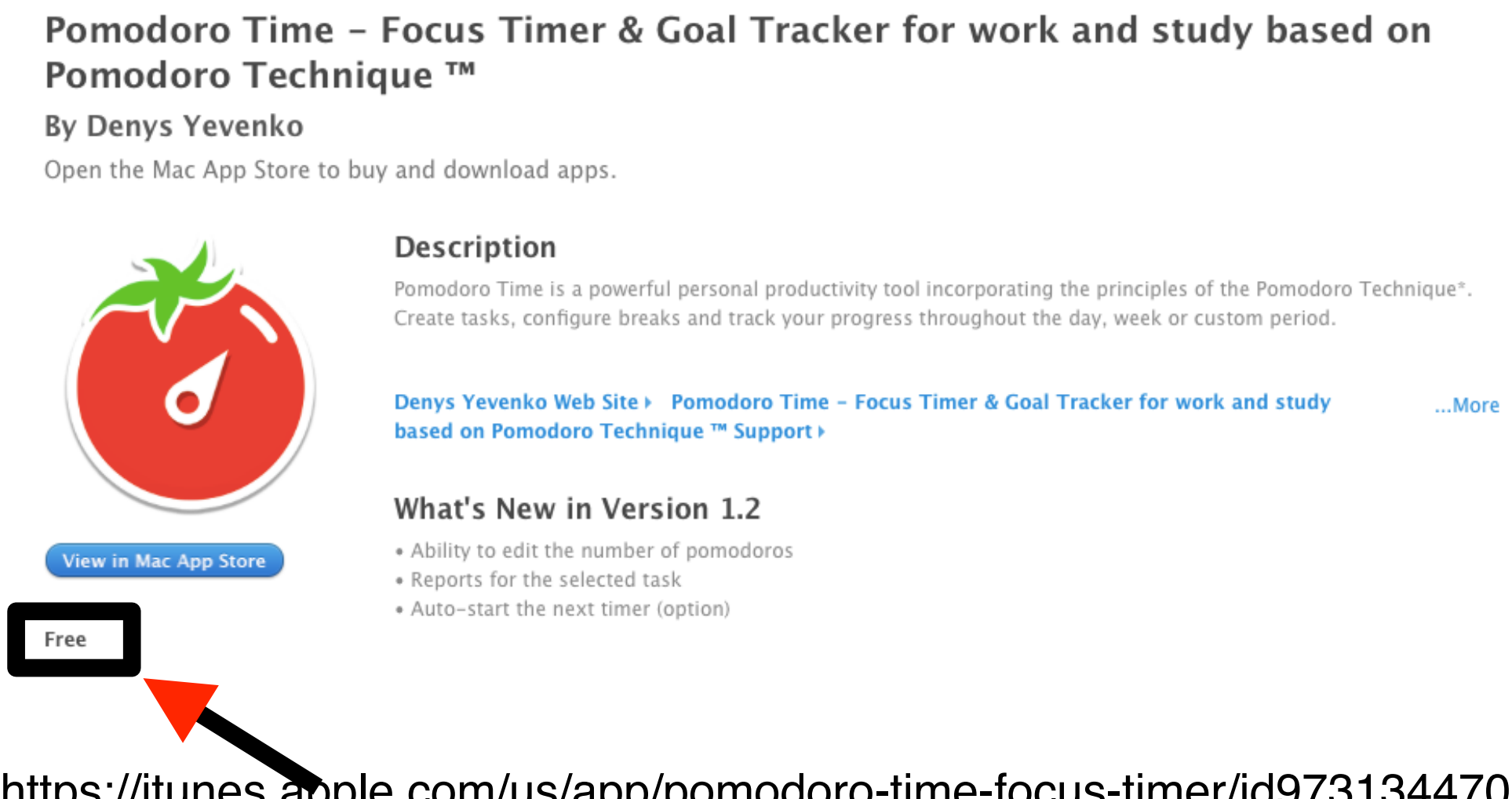


Work for 25 minutes.

Take a break for 5.

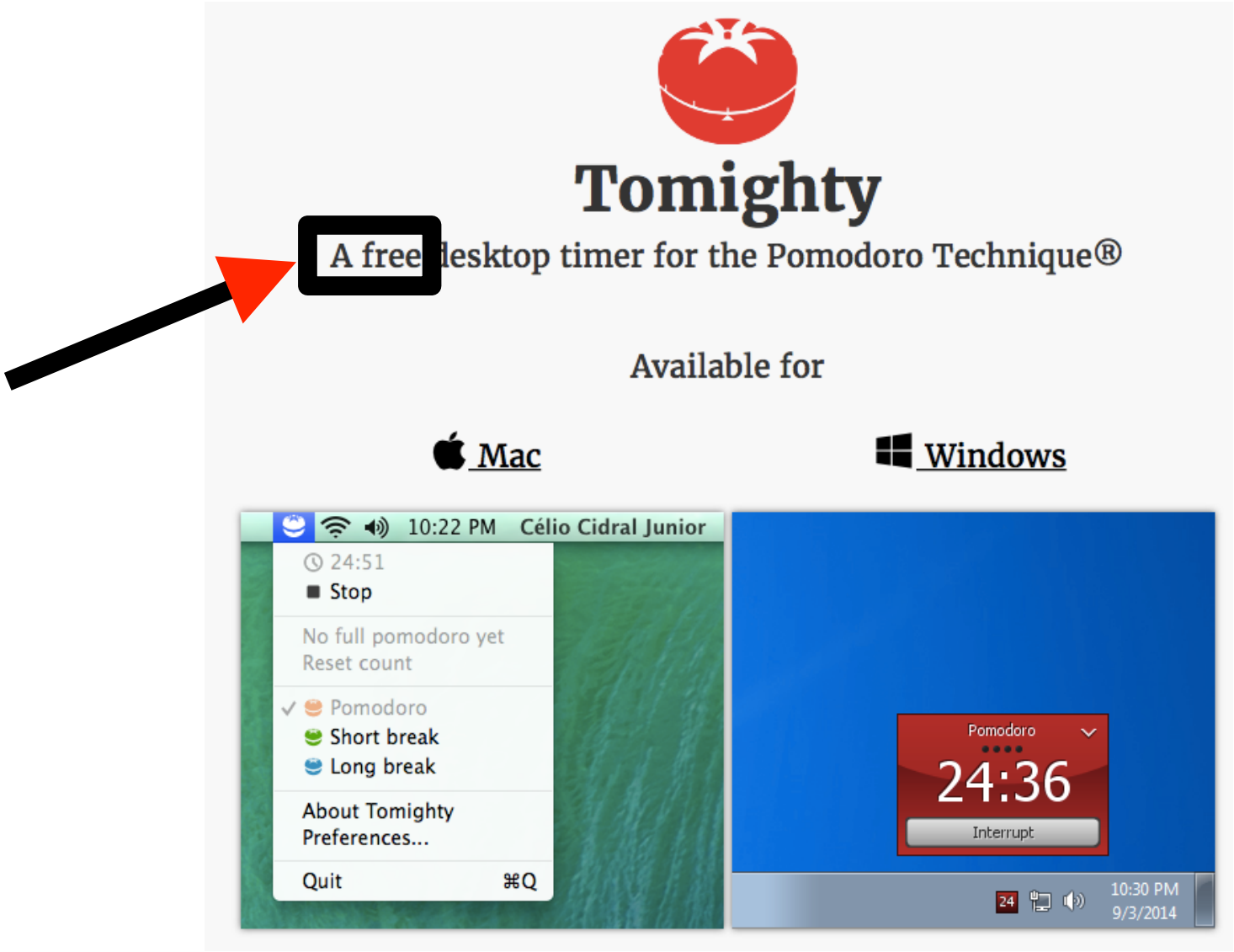
http://www.dwuser.com/education/content/pomodoro-productivity-a-simple-time-management-technique-to-eliminate-procrastinatio

There's an app for that.



https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/pomodoro-time-focus-timer/id973134470?mt=12

There are a lot of apps for that.

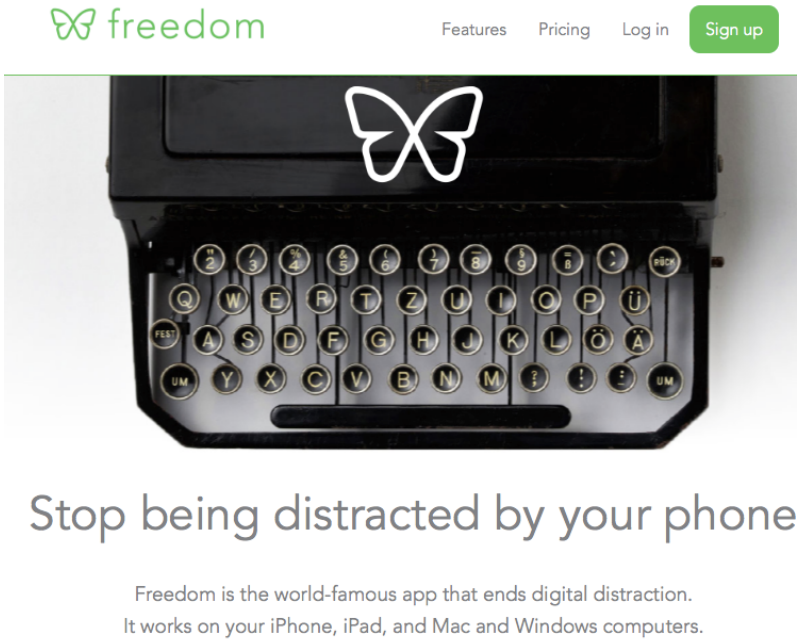


http://www.tomighty.org

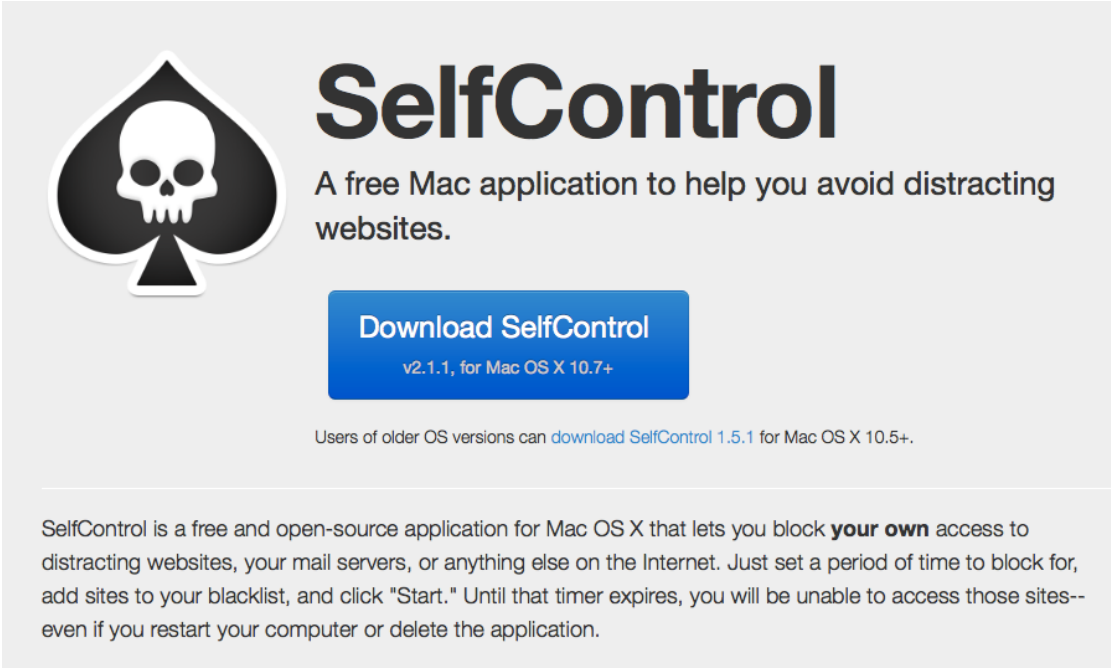
There are apps that organize your whole day into 30 minute chunks.

http://3030.binaryhammer.com

There are apps to turn off access to distracting internet sites



https://freedom.to



http://selfcontrolapp.com

"Schedule no more than a 1 hour chunk, and don't aim to write more than ~200 words."

But what should one do *during* these writing sprints?

Your goal is a *first* draft

Not a complete draft.

Not a polished draft.

Not a perfect draft.

Writing a first draft is like hitting the beach on D-Day. You don't stop to tend the wounded or mourn the dead. If you don't get off the beach, you'll die there . . . The point of the first draft is not to get it right, but to get it written. Don't go back and rewrite the first chapter until you've finished the last. Get off the beach. Otherwise, you may never get past page twenty. (Hughes 2011)

Quote by Matt Hughs, from "Scientist's Guide to Writing" by S. Heard

Jon Winokur
@AdviceToWriters

The first draft of anything is sh!t.
ERNEST HEMINGWAY

#amwriting #writing #writingtips

Do not edit or over-analyze!

Get the
thoughts down.

Clean it up later.

Do not edit or over-analyze!

Do not stop to plot or calculate or look up references!

Just type "XXX" or "###" or "REF?" and move on.

What if I don't know what I have to say?

There is *always* something you know how to say, so write that.

- What you did.
- Figure captions.
- Describing a plot in the text.
- Where the data came from.

What if I don't know what I have to say?

Make a plan to use the remaining 7 hours of the day to learn something new to say tomorrow.

- "Calculate the error bar."
- "Fit the function".
- "Compare to Paper X's results."
- "Test if Y is true"
- "Read up on Topic Y"

When you stop writing…

…*always* have a plan for what you want to write in the next session*.

*And write it down in bold-face/color in the document. Future You will thank you.

Switching our focus…

Before:
Improving precision & clarity

Now:
Improving content & intent

Improving content & intent

Sentences convey meaning to the reader.

Improving content & intent

Sentences convey meaning to the reader.

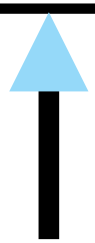
As the writer, your job is to intentionally craft sentences that effectively convey your meaning.

Effectively conveying your intent

In English, the structure of your sentence tells the reader what you think is important, and what information will be coming next.

Sentence structure

Beginning of the sentence	End of the sentence



Has the most impact, and shapes what the reader thinks the sentence is about.

Sentence structure

Beginning of the sentence	End of the sentence

Shapes the reader's expectations for the next sentence.

Example from Assignment #1

"PNe are typically identified by searching for objects with bright OIII lines using the difference of on- and off-band narrow-band photometry followed up with spectroscopic observations to confirm the candidates are PNe as opposed to HII regions or Wolf-Rayet stars which also emit strong OIII lines."

Original

Example from Assignment #1

"PNe have bright OIII lines and are typically identified using narrow-band imaging, using the difference of on- and off-band photometry. PNe candidates must be confirmed with spectroscopic observations, as other objects like HII regions and WR stars also have strong OIII emission."

One edit

Example from Assignment #1

"Strong OIII lines observed using the difference of on- and off-band narrow-band photometry identifies objects such as PNe, HII regions, and Wolf-Rayet stars. PNe can be distinguished by follow-up spectroscopic observations."

Another edit

Compare the first and second edits:

"PNe have bright OIII lines and are typically identified using narrow-band imaging, using the difference of on- and off-band photometry. PNe candidates must be confirmed with spectroscopic observations, as other objects like HII regions and WR stars also have strong OIII emission."

"Strong OIII lines observed using the difference of on- and off-band narrow-band photometry identifies objects such as PNe, HII regions, and Wolf-Rayet stars. PNe can be distinguished by follow-up spectroscopic observations."

What is the start signalling?

"PNe have bright OIII lines and are typically identified using narrow-band imaging, using the difference of on- and off-band photometry. PNe candidates must be confirmed with spectroscopic observations, as other objects like HII regions and WR stars also have strong OIII emission."

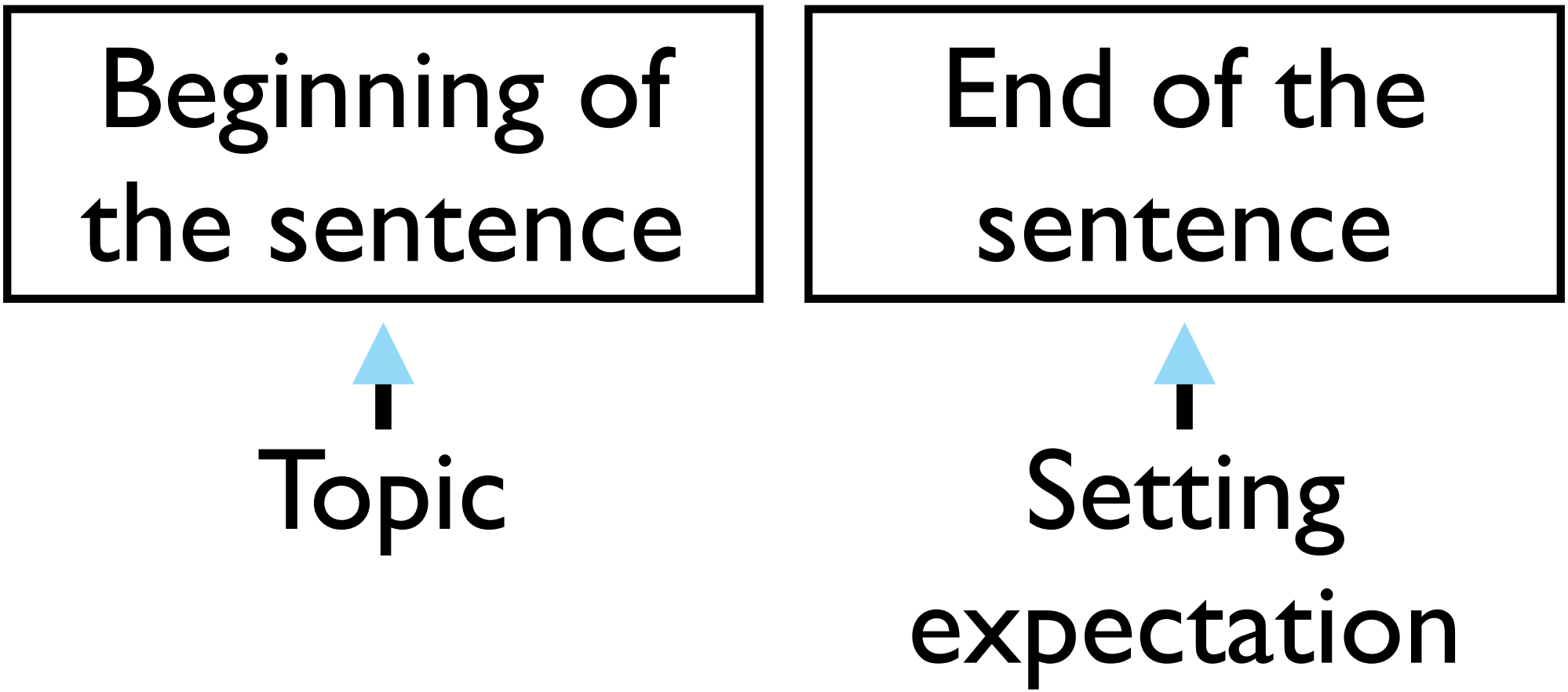
"Strong OIII lines observed using the difference of on- and off-band narrow-band photometry identifies objects such as PNe, HII regions, and Wolf-Rayet stars. PNe can be distinguished by follow-up spectroscopic observations."

What is the end signalling?

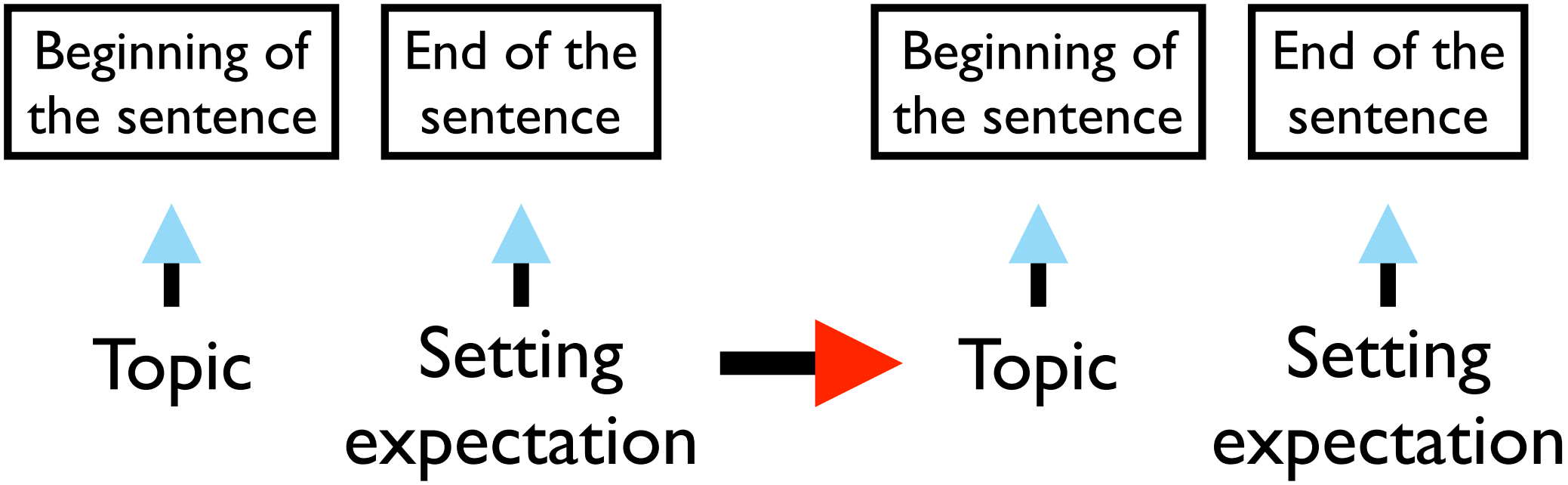
"PNe have bright OIII lines and are typically identified using narrow-band imaging, using the difference of on- and off-band photometry. PNe candidates must be confirmed with spectroscopic observations, as other objects like HII regions and WR stars also have strong OIII emission."

"Strong OIII lines observed using the difference of on- and off-band narrow-band photometry identifies objects such as PNe, HII regions, and Wolf-Rayet stars. PNe can be distinguished by follow-up spectroscopic observations."

Clear, concisely written sentences can be *still* be confusing when this structure is violated!

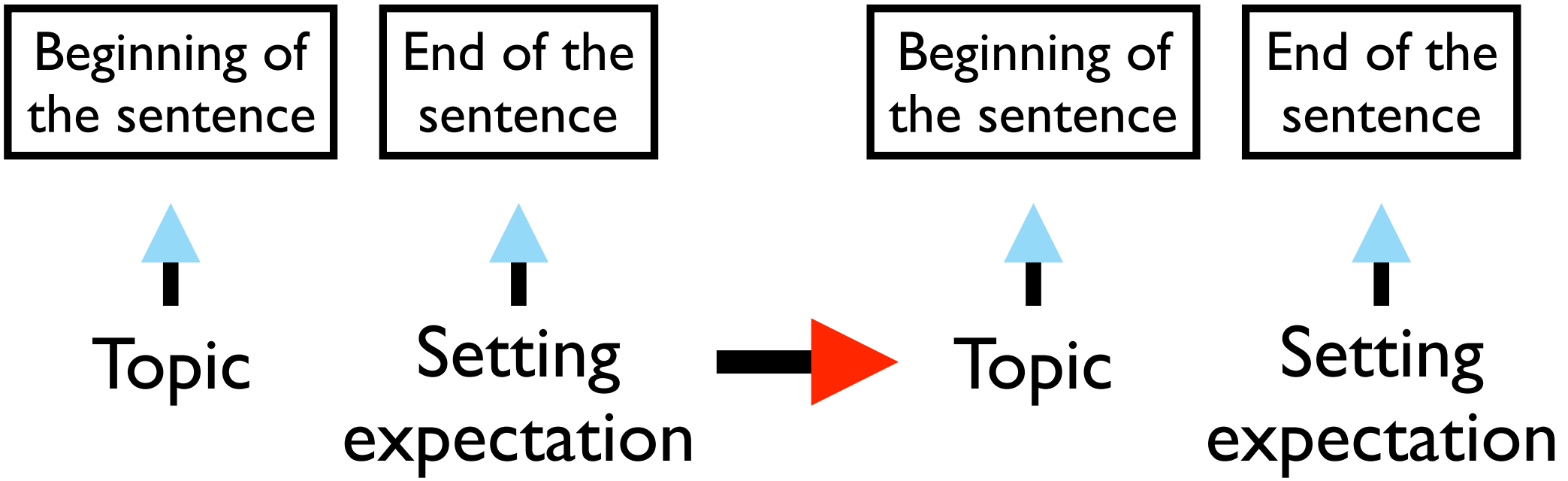


The rhetorical content of a series of sentences should follow:



When it doesn't, the reader feels stupid, because they didn't follow

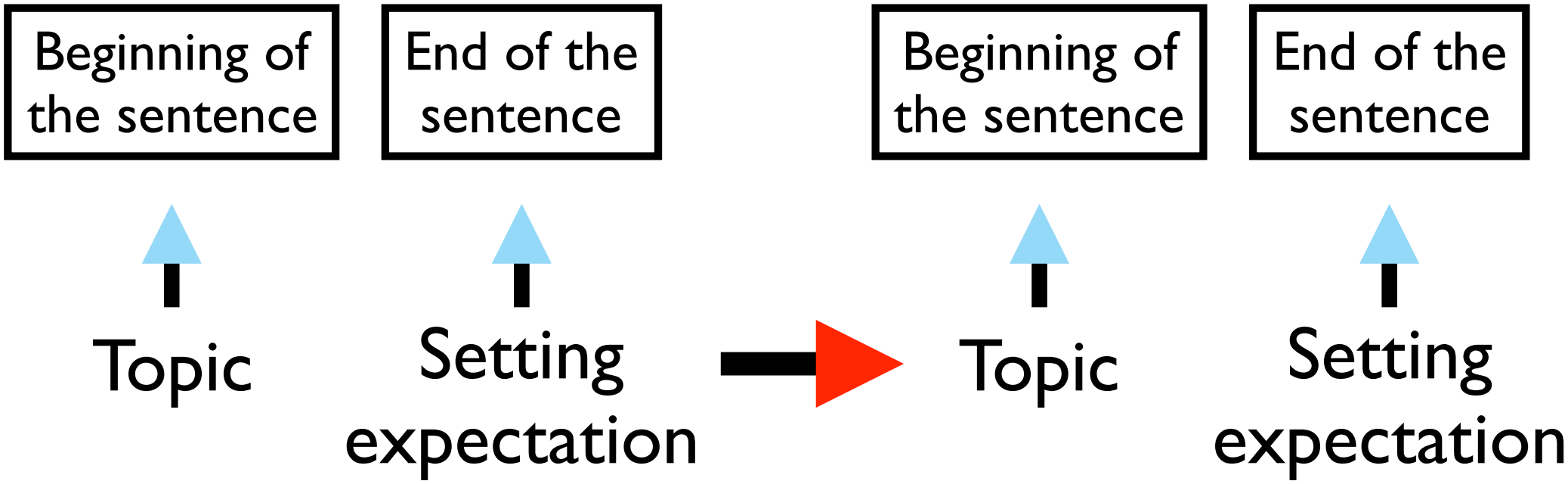
Do not interpret this *too* rigidly.



"Star formation requires gas. Gas is found in the ISM. The ISM is multiphase."

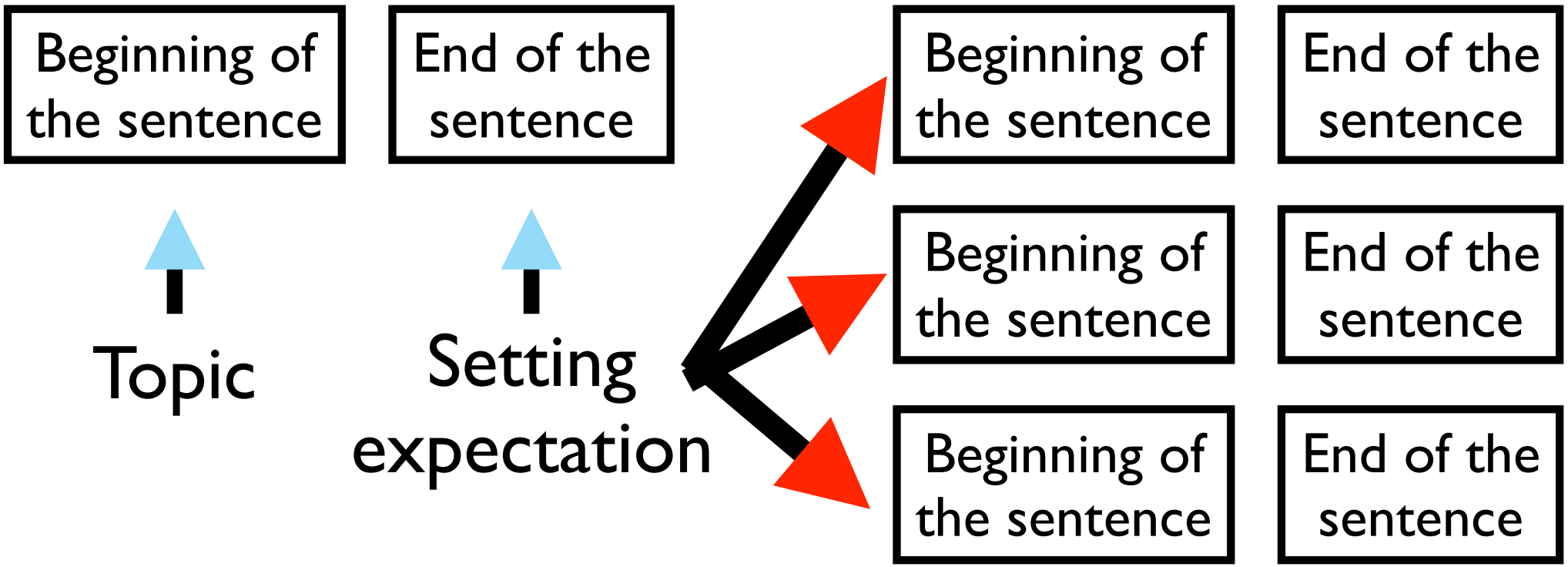
Text like this can get tedious

How to be clear-but-not-dull

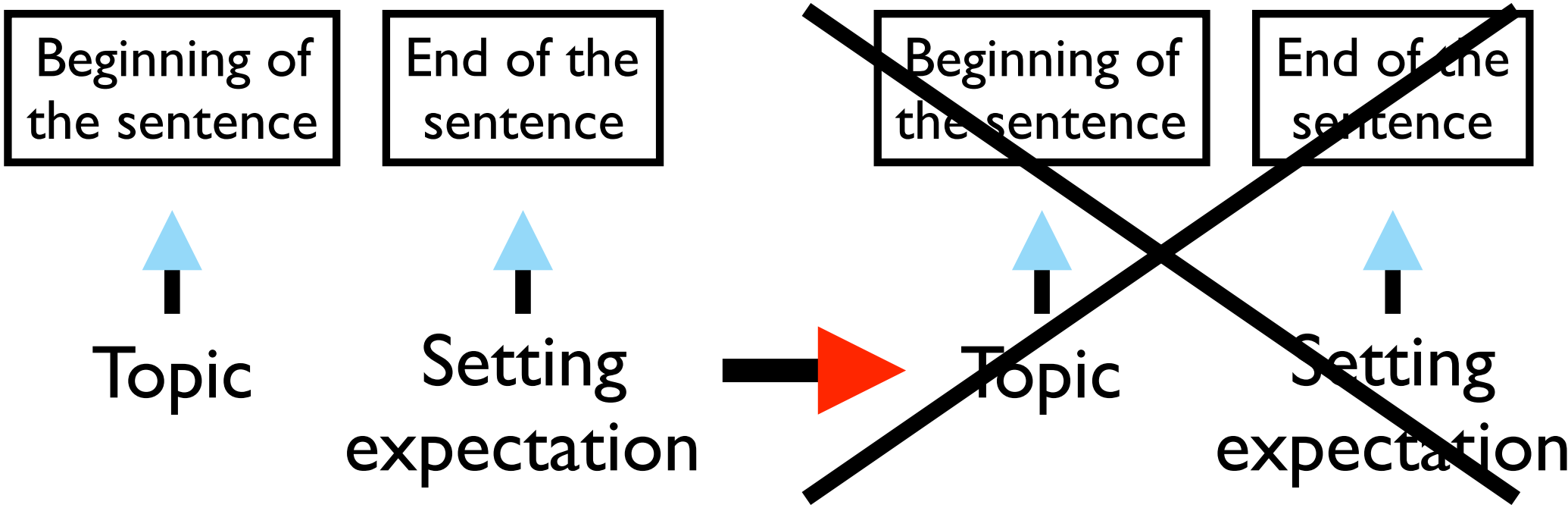


Key is to signal the reader when you're *not* going to follow this expected structure.

For example, signalling "this is a list" tells the reader to expect this structure



Other ways to signal that you're not going to do what's expected

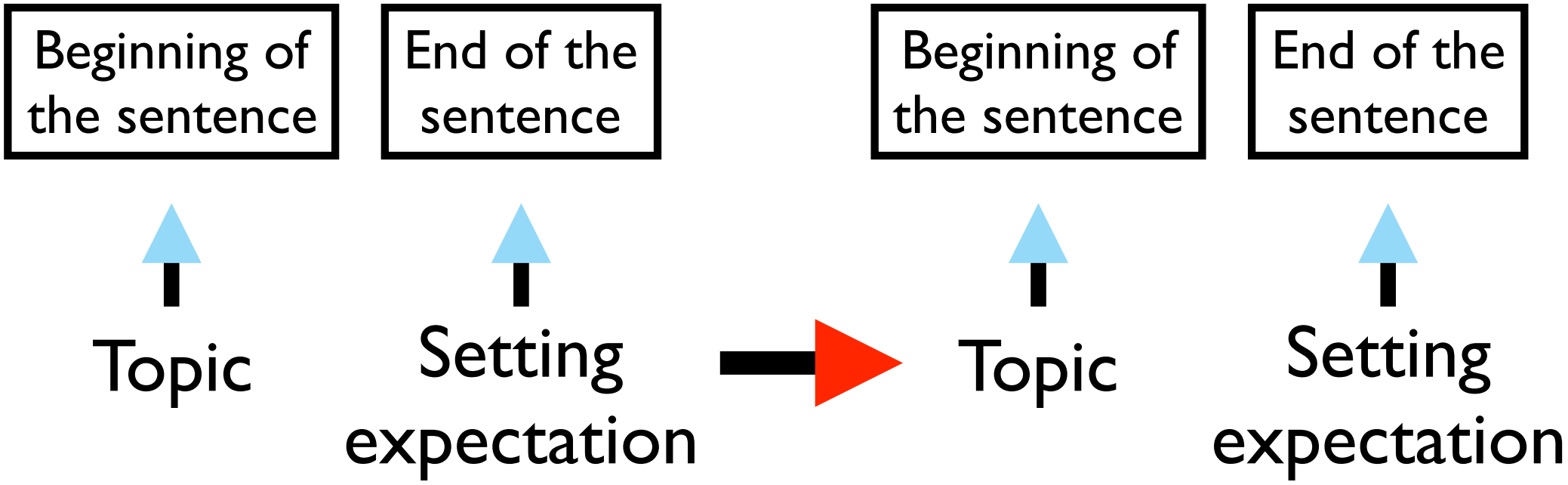


Transitional words & phrases

Transitional phrases

- Adding one point to another
  - *and, in addition, moreover, furthermore…*
- Indicating similarity
  - *likewise, similarly, in the same way…*
- Contrasting
  - *but, in contrast, however, on the contrary, never the less, although, even so, in spite of/despite…*
- Showing how one thing results from another
  - *so, therefore, hence, thus, as a result, consequently, accordingly…*
- Summing up
  - *in conclusion, in summary, to summarize, to conclude, in brief, in other words…*

Choose the start of your sentences carefully!



Start with the main cognitive element.

Avoid starting with subordinate clauses or phrases.

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Example

"*Although spectroscopic follow-up is required, narrow-band imaging is typically used to identify PNe*"

"*Although spectroscopic follow-up is required, narrow-band imaging is typically used to identify PNe*"

When the reader finishes "*Although spectroscopic follow-up is required*", he or she still doesn't know what the sentence is going to be about.

"*Although spectroscopic follow-up is required, narrow-band imaging is typically used to identify PNe*"

versus

"*Narrow-band imaging is typically used to identify PNe, although spectroscopic follow-up is required*"

A simple reordering, and it's much clearer.

Avoid starting with subordinate clauses or phrases

There are times where it's useful to ignore this "rule".

"Star formation requires gas. Gas is found in the ISM. The ISM is multiphase. Of the different phases, the molecular phase is the most important for star formation."

Here, the leading phrase provides the connection to the content of the previous sentence, allowing a new main topic to take over as subject.

Sometimes, you will need to use passive voice to put the correct topic first.

This choice is perfectly fine!
(We'll discuss this more later)

Another edit…

"These observations will significantly expand the breadth of star formation studies in terms of age ranges and timescales examined, as well as metallicity (with respect to the Solar neighborhood) and galactic environment."

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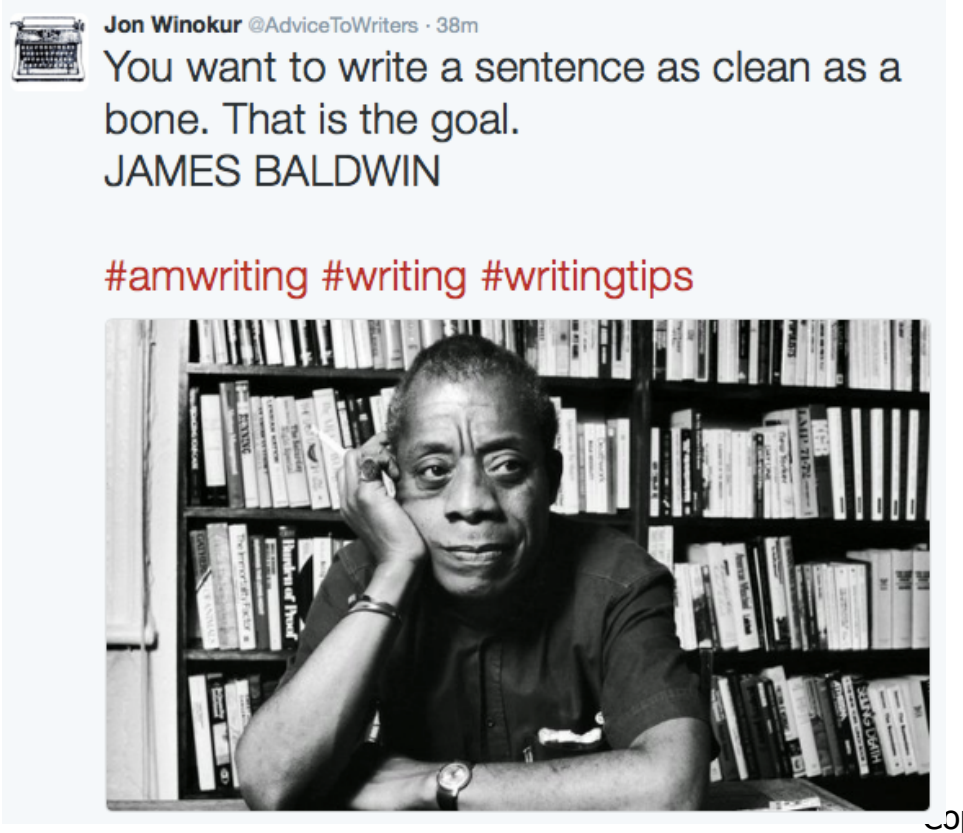

"These observations will significantly expand the breadth of star formation studies in terms of age ranges and timescales examined, as well as metallicity (with respect to the Solar neighborhood) and galactic environment."

Sometimes, a sentence will not be easily tweaked with small, sequential changes

This sentence is a case where the concept is simpler than the sentence wound up being.

"These observations will significantly expand the breadth of star formation studies in terms of age ranges and timescales examined, as well as metallicity (with respect to the Solar neighborhood) and galactic environment."

So sometimes, you step back and ask, "what am I trying to convey?".

What are the main ideas here?

"These observations will significantly expand the breadth of star formation studies in terms of age ranges and timescales examined, as well as metallicity (with respect to the Solar neighborhood) and galactic environment."

- (Implied) Past star formation studies sampled limited ranges of parameter space.
- (Explicit) Our new study broadens that range.

Other issues

"These observations will significantly expand the breadth of star formation studies in terms of age ranges and timescales examined, as well as metallicity (with respect to the Solar neighborhood) and galactic environment."

- It's a bit vague.
- It's not very efficient.

So let's just try a rewrite*.

"These observations will significantly expand the breadth of star formation studies in terms of age ranges and timescales examined, as well as metallicity (with respect to the Solar neighborhood) and galactic environment."

"These observations will study star formation over larger age ranges, with better time resolution, at lower metallicities, and at higher ISM pressures."

*This text is for a proposal, where you want direct, concise, "action-filled" language.

There's still an issue, though.

"These observations will study star formation over larger age ranges, with better time resolution, at lower metallicities, and at higher ISM pressures."

Compared to what?

This might be clear from context, but we could make it explicit.

"These observations will study star formation over larger age ranges, with better time resolution, at lower metallicities, and at higher ISM pressures."

Compared to what?

"These observations will study star formation over larger age ranges, with better time resolution, at lower metallicities, and at higher ISM pressures, compared to Milky Way studies."

Nit-picking over word choices…

"These observations will study star formation over larger age ranges, with better time resolution, at lower metallicities, and at higher ISM pressures, compared to Milky Way studies."

Can observations study something? Nope.

"These observations will reveal…"
"With these observations, we will study…"

Nit-picking over word choices…

"With these observations, we will study star formation over larger age ranges, with better time resolution, at lower metallicities, and at higher ISM pressures, compared to Milky Way studies."

Do we have the best comparative word?
Using words that can only be applied to that particular noun adds clarity.

Durations: longer/shorter
Rates: faster/slower
Masses: heavier/lighter

>

Generic
"larger/smaller"

Nit-picking over word choices…

"With these observations, we will study star formation over larger age ranges, with better time resolution, at lower metallicities, and at higher ISM pressures, compared to Milky Way studies."

Do we have the best comparative word?

Here, I think we do, because "ranges" are "larger/smaller". If it had been "timescales", I would go with "over longer timescales".

Before (32 words)

"These observations will significantly expand the breadth of star formation studies in terms of age ranges and timescales examined, as well as metallicity (with respect to the Solar neighborhood) and galactic environment."

After (29 words)

"With these observations, we will study star formation over larger age ranges, with better time resolution, at lower metallicities, and at higher ISM pressures, compared to Milky Way studies."