

## Exercise—Previously On (Week 2)

Take out your digital or physical notebook and write down what you remember about the concepts covered in earlier sessions.

- “The Words Under Words” is a direct carryover from the Takeaways section at the end of Week One. I repeat it again here because it is such a fundamental part of becoming a better writer.
- “Deliberate Practice” is also a kind of carryover from the Takeaways section—but a little less so.
- “Mechanics and Strategy” we didn’t have a chance to review yet at all.

Jot down some quick notes about at least two of these concepts, just to activate your learning process a bit more robustly.

Remember: we’re intentionally overdoing these moments of reflection now because I really want you to get in the habit of taking time to process what you’ve learned. It’s an extremely important part of development.

### Optional Resources:

- Read: [Learning by Thinking: How Reflection Improves Performance](#) by Giada Di Stefano, Francesca Gino, Gary Pisano, and Bradley Staats (Harvard Business School, 2014)
- Read: [Encouraging Metacognition in the Classroom](#) (Yale Center for Teaching and Learning, 2020)

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### Previously on (Week 2 Reflection)

- The Words Under Words: Words carry more than their dictionary meaning. They influence how people feel, judge and react. This matters to me because I’m framing with words can mean the difference between being heard and being dismissed, and I never want to lose that power. I want to be mindful of how words frame reality.
- Deliberate Practice: Growth doesn’t come from repetition alone but from intentional practice with reflection. That matches who I am: process-driven, structured, and committed to improvement. For me, deliberate practice is less about quantity and more about quality; the steady, intentional work that turns writing into strength.
- Mechanics and Strategy: Mechanics = how, Strategy = why. This connects to my personality, I’m both detailed-oriented (mechanics) and purpose-driven (strategy). Getting the balance right makes my communication more persuasive and aligned with my goals.

## Exercise—Interrupting Elements

I like the idea that every page in every book can have a gem on it. It's probably what I love most about writing—that words can be used in a way that's like a child playing in a sandpit, rearranging things, swapping them around.

—Markus Zusak, author interview in the anniversary edition of *The Book Thief* (2007)

(The assignment below appears in the [Practice Section](#) of Chapter 2 of *Good with Words: Writing and Editing*. The corresponding pages in the print version are 40-41.)

### Background

The University of Virginia used to have a website to help writers and writing teachers. On it, several principles for clear and direct communication were listed. One aligned particularly well with the idea of the infinite power of grammar and the helpful edits that can be made through subtle shifts in syntax. Advising writers to avoid interrupting their subjects and verbs with long phrases and clauses, the site explained that “when readers do not see a verb right after a subject, the sentence is probably more difficult than it has to be.”

It then recommended shifting an interrupting element to either the end or the beginning of the sentence, depending on where the element fits better. Here's the example the site offered:

- **Original Version:** Some scientists, because they write in a style that is so impersonal and objective, do not communicate with laypeople easily.
- **Clearer and More Direct Version:** Some scientists do not communicate with laypeople easily, because they write in a style that is so impersonal and objective.

The advice reinforces a broader principle on the site: “Get to verbs quickly.” Readers typically don't like to have to wait to figure out the main action of the sentence. They get confused. They get distracted. Their brains hurt.

I say that to my law students all the time. “Don't make my brain hurt. It's not going to make me like you or be persuaded by your points. And I am pretty sure the judge (or client) is going to feel the same way.”

### Assignment

Take at least three pages of something you have written recently. Read it carefully. Using a blue pen, circle the subject in each sentence. Using the same blue pen, circle the verb that goes with that subject. Then with a red pen, underline any interrupting element; in other words, underline any segment of the sentence in which the verb does not come directly after the subject but is instead separated—you might even think of it as being delayed—by an intervening phrase or clause.

To give you a sense of what you'll be looking for, here is a different view of the original sentence from the Virginia website:

- SUBJECT: "Some scientists"
- INTERRUPTING ELEMENT: "because they write in a style that is so impersonal and objective"
- MAIN VERB: "do not communicate with laypeople easily"

It is possible that you will have multiple subjects and multiple verbs in your sentences. The example from Virginia does:

- FIRST SUBJECT: "Some scientists" → FIRST VERB: "do not communicate"
- SECOND SUBJECT: "they" → SECOND VERB: "write"

In that case, use one color pen for the first subject-verb pair and a different color pen for any additional subject-verb pairs. But always mark interrupting elements in red. After you're done, these elements should stand out unmistakably.

You don't have to move or delete every interrupting element you find. Some can be quite useful—for emphasis, for rhythm, for a break from the monotony created when all you do is use the same straightforward syntax. Toward the end of each semester, I actually encourage my students to experiment with interrupting elements. I tell them that interrupting elements can add variety and sophistication to their writing, that interrupting elements are used all the time by master stylists like James Baldwin, Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, Edward Gibbon, Marcel Proust, and Gabriel García Márquez.

But the point of the current assignment is to focus on simply becoming aware of interrupting elements. Then you can decide which are worth keeping.

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Example from my Errors and Insight's section

*I've been told that my writing can come off blunt or abrasive, even when I am trying to be clear or efficient.*

Subject: *my writing*

Verb: *can come off*

Interrupting element: *I've been told that* (this delays the main subject/verb).

*When I don't feel 100% confident in what I'm saying, I tend to pile on explanations to prove my point or cover all my basis*

Subject: *I*

Verb: *tend*

Interrupting element: *When I don't feel 100% confident in what I'm saying* (delays the main clause).

*Even when I know better, I sometimes cut it too close.*

Subject: *I*

Verb: *cut*

Interrupting element: *Even when I know better* (delays the verb).

## Exercise—Good Sentences (Entrepreneurship)

Same drill as last week. Select something to read from the options below and then write out your favorite sentence.

### Option #1

Choose something from the [Entrepreneurship](#) section of the [Good Sentences](#)\* library. Here are a few to consider.

- [A Truck Full of Money](#) by Tracey Kidder (2016)
- [What Valuable Company Is Nobody Building](#) by Peter Thiel (2014)

\*The Good Sentences library was originally created for University of Michigan students, so there may be some pieces that you can't access unless you are a student enrolled in a program there. But click around. There is plenty of stuff that is available to everybody.

### Option #2

Choose something from the November 2018 issue of the [Good Sentences monthly email](#).

### Option #3

Choose something from this list of book excerpts.

- [Brotopia](#) by Emily Chang (2018)
- [The Hard Thing About Hard Things](#) by Ben Horowitz (2014)
- [Measure What Matters](#) by John Doerr (2017)

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From Measure What Matters (John Doerr, 2017)

*"Ideas are easy—execution is everything."*

Reflection: I like how short and punchy this is. The dash emphasizes contrast, and the rhythm makes it memorable.

## Exercise—Takeaways (Week 2)

Now it's time to perform some self-explaining—or even better, try to teach someone else what you just learned about the following three concepts:

- Syntax
- Passive on Purpose
- The Animal Farm Principle

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Syntax is about the arrangement of words in a sentence, not just which words you choose. Changing word order can completely shift emphasis or meaning, as in "dog bites man" versus "man bites dog." Rearranging sentence elements can be like moving furniture, sometimes a different arrangement makes the whole room, or sentence, work better.

Passive on Purpose reminded me that the passive voice isn't always bad. It gets a lot of criticism, but when used intentionally, it can be powerful. Passive voice can emphasize the action rather than the actor, or strategically blur responsibility, which makes it useful in certain professional and rhetorical settings.

The Animal Farm Principle reframes time management with the idea that all hours are equal, but some hours are more equal than others. Some hours in the day hold more value because that's when we do our best work. Protecting those hours for important projects can make the difference between just getting things done and doing them well.