

TWELFTH EDITION

Style

*Lessons in
Clarity and Grace*

JOSEPH M. WILLIAMS

JOSEPH BIZUP

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Lesson 2 Correctness

God does not much mind bad grammar, but He does not take any particular pleasure in it.

—Erasmus

Established custom, in speaking and writing, is the standard to which we must at last resort for determining every controverted point in language and style.

—Hugh Blair

English usage is sometimes more than mere taste, judgment, and education—sometimes it's sheer luck, like getting across the street.

—E. B. White

Three Kinds of Rules

These corrosive social attitudes about correctness have been encouraged by generations of grammarians who, in their zeal to codify “good” English, have confused three kinds of “rules.”

1. Real Rules

Real rules define what makes English English: articles must precede nouns: *the book*, not *book the*. Speakers born into English don’t think about these rules at all when they write, and they violate them only when tired or distracted.

2. Social Rules

Social rules distinguish Standard English from nonstandard: *He doesn’t have any money* versus *He don’t have no money*. Schooled writers observe these rules as naturally as they observe the Real Rules and think about them only when they notice others violating them. The only writers who *self-consciously* try to follow them are those not born into Standard English who are striving to associate themselves with the English-speaking educated classes.

3. Invented Rules

Finally, some grammarians have invented a handful of rules that they think we all *should* observe. These are the rules that the grammar police love to enforce and that too many educated writers obsess over. Most date from the last half of the eighteenth century:

Don’t split infinitives, as in *to quietly leave*.

Don't end a sentence with a preposition.

A few date from the twentieth century:

Don't use *hopefully* for *I hope*, as in ***Hopefully***, *it won't rain*.

Don't use *which* for *that*, as in *a car **which** I sold*.

For almost 300 years, grammarians have accused the best writers of violating rules like these, and the best writers have consistently ignored them. Which is lucky for the grammarians, because if writers did obey all the rules, grammarians would have to keep inventing new ones, or find another line of work. The fact is, none of these invented rules reflects the unself-conscious usage of our best writers. In this lesson, we focus on this third kind of rule, the handful of invented ones, because only they vex those who already write Standard English.

Observing Rules Thoughtfully

It is no simple matter to deal with these invented rules if you want to be thought of as someone who writes “correctly.” You could choose the worst-case policy: follow all the rules all the time because sometime, someone will criticize you for something—for beginning a sentence with *and* or ending it with *up*. But if you try to obey all the rules all the time, you risk becoming so obsessed with rules that you tie yourself in knots. And sooner or later, you will impose those rules—real or not—on others.

The alternative to blind obedience is selective observance. But then you have to decide which rules to observe and which to ignore. And if you ignore an alleged rule, you may have to deal with someone whose passion for “good” grammar makes her see in your split infinitive a sign of intellectual flabbiness, moral corruption, and social decay.

If you want to avoid being accused of “lacking standards” but refuse to submit to whatever “rule” someone can dredge up from ninth-grade English, you have to know more about these invented rules than the rule-mongers do. The rest of this lesson helps you do just that.

Lesson 5 Cohesion and Coherence

It is a common Fault in Writers, to allow their Readers too much knowledge: They begin with that which should be the Middle, and skipping backwards and forwards, 'tis impossible for any one but he who is perfect in the Subject before, to understand their Work, and such an one has no Occasion to read it.

—Benjamin Franklin

The two capital secrets in the art of prose composition are these: first, the philosophy of transition and connection; or the art by which one step in an evolution of thought is made to arise out of another: all fluent and effective composition depends on the connections; secondly, the way in which sentences are made to modify each other; for the most powerful effects in written eloquence arise out of this reverberation, as it were, from each other in a rapid succession of sentences.

—Thomas de Quincey

Understanding How Sentences Connect

So far, I have focused mainly on individual sentences, and I have treated clarity as if we could achieve it just by mapping characters and actions onto subjects and verbs. But readers need more than individually clear sentences before they feel a passage “hangs together.” These two passages, for example, say much the same thing but feel very different:

1a. The safeguard of democracy everywhere—an educated citizenry—is being threatened by college costs that have been rising fast for the last several years. Increases in family income have been significantly outpaced by increases in tuition at colleges and universities during that period. Only the children of the wealthiest families in our society will be able to afford a college education if this trend continues. Knowledge and intellectual skills, in addition to wealth, will divide us as a people, when that happens. Equal opportunity and the egalitarian basis of our democratic society could be eroded by such a divide.

✓ 1b. In the last several years, college costs have been rising so fast that they are now threatening the safeguard of democracy everywhere: an educated citizenry. During that period, tuition has significantly outpaced increases in family income. If this trend continues, a college education will soon be affordable only by the children of the wealthiest families in our society. When that happens, we will be divided as a people not only by wealth, but by knowledge and intellectual skills. Such a divide will erode equal opportunity and the egalitarian basis of our democratic society.

The first seems choppy, even disorganized; the second seems more connected.

But like the word *clear*, the words *choppy*, *disorganized*, and *connected* refer not to the words on the page but to how they make us *feel*. What is it about the *arrangement* of words in (1a) that makes us feel we are moving through it

in fits and starts? Why does (1b) seem to flow more easily? We base those judgments on two aspects of word order:

- We judge a sequence of sentences to be *cohesive* based on how each sentence ends and the next begins.
- We judge a whole passage to be *coherent* based on how all the sentences in it cumulatively begin.

In this lesson, I discuss the cohesion and coherence of passages; in [Lessons 7](#) and [8](#), I discuss the coherence of whole documents.

Cohesion

The Sense of Flow

In [Lesson 4](#), we devoted a few pages to that familiar advice, *Avoid passives*. If we always did, we would choose the active verb in sentence (2a) over the passive in (2b):

2a. The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble **creates** _{active} a black hole.

2b. A black hole **is created** _{passive} by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.

But we might choose otherwise in context. Consider:

¹Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. ^{2a}**The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole.** ³So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

¹Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. ^{2b}**A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.** ³So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

In this context, our sense of “flow” calls not for (2a), the sentence with the active verb, but for (2b), the one with the passive.

The reason is clear: the last four words of sentence (1) introduce an important character—*black holes in space*. But with sentence (2a), the next concepts we

hit are *collapsed stars* and *marbles*, information that seems to come out of nowhere:

¹Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists studying black holes in space. ^{2a}The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates. . . .

If, however, we follow sentence (1) with (2b), the sentence with the passive verb, we feel those sentences connect more smoothly, because now the first words in (2b) repeat what we just read at the end of (1):

¹. . . by scientists studying black holes in space. ^{2b}A black hole is created by

Note too that the passive lets us put at the *end* of sentence (2b) words that connect it to the *beginning* of sentence (3):

¹. . . black holes in space. ^{2b}A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into **a point perhaps no larger than a marble**. ³**So much matter compressed into so little volume** changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

Here's the Point:

Sentences are *cohesive* when the last few words of one sentence set up information that appears in the first few words of the next. That's what gives us our experience of flow. And in fact, that's the main function of the passive in the language: to let us arrange sentences so that they flow easily from one to the next.

Managing Information: Old before New

We learn by connecting new information to what we already know. In sentences, therefore, readers prefer to encounter information that is old or familiar *to them* before they encounter information that is new or unfamiliar. So:

1. Begin sentences with information familiar to your readers. Readers get that familiar information in two ways. First, they remember words from the sentences they just read. That's why in our example about black holes, the beginning of (2b) coheres with the end of (1) and why the beginning of (3) coheres with the end of (2b). Second, readers bring to a sentence a general knowledge of its subject. We would not be surprised, for example, to find the next sentence (4) begin like this:

. . . changes the fabric of space around it in puzzling ways.

⁴**Astronomers have reported** that

The word *Astronomers* did not appear in the preceding sentences, but since we are reading about space, we wouldn't be surprised to find it beginning a sentence in the passage.

2. End sentences with information that readers cannot anticipate. Your sentences have to tell your readers something new, but readers always prefer to receive this new information after they have read something familiar.
3. Begin sentences with information that readers will find simple; end with information they will find complex. This guideline follows from the others. What's familiar to your readers will seem simple to them; what's unfamiliar will seem complex.

You can more easily see when others fail to observe this old-before-new principle than when you do, because after you've worked on your own ideas for a while, they all seem familiar—to you. But hard as it is to distinguish old from new in your own writing, you have to try, because readers expect sentences to begin with information that is familiar to *them* and to end with information that is new. Thwart this expectation too often and your readers won't understand you (or at least think they don't).

In every sequence of sentences you write, you have to balance principles that make individual sentences clear and principles that make the whole passage cohesive. *But in that tradeoff, give priority to helping readers create a sense of cohesive flow.* Fortunately, the principle of old before new cooperates with the principle of characters as subjects. Once you mention your main characters, readers recognize them as familiar. So when characters are up front, so is familiar information.

Here's the Point:

So far, we have identified three main principles of clarity. Two are about sentences:

- Make main characters the subjects of sentences.
- Make important actions verbs.

The third is about sentences as well, but it also explains how sentences flow together:

- Put old information before new information.

These principles usually complement one another, but if you have to choose among them, favor the third. The way you organize old and new information determines how cohesive readers will find your writing. And for readers, a passage's overall *cohesion* trumps the *clarity* of individual sentences.

Quick Tip

Writers often refer to something in a previous sentence with words such as *this, these, that, those, another, such, second, or more*. When you use any of those signals, try to put them at or close to the beginning of a sentence:

How to calculate credits for classes taken in a community college is **another** issue that we must consider.

✓ **Another** issue that we must consider is how to calculate credits for classes taken in a community college.

Exercise 5.1

1. Revise these two passages to improve their flow by putting old information first in each sentence. In (1), I have boldfaced the words that I feel are old information.
 1. Two aims—the recovery of the American economy and the modernization of America into a military power—were **in the president’s mind when he assumed office**. The drop in unemployment figures and inflation, and the increase in the GDP testifies to **his success in the first**. But America’s increased involvement in international conflict without any clear set of political goals indicates **less success with the second**. Nevertheless, increases in the military budget and a good deal of saber rattling **pleased the American voter**.
 2. The components of Abco’s profitability, particularly growth in Asian markets, will be highlighted in our report to demonstrate its advantages versus competitors. Revenue returns along several dimensions—product type, end-use, distribution channels, etc.—will provide a basis for this analysis. Likely growth prospects of Abco’s newest product lines will depend most on the development of distribution channels in China, according to our projections. A range of innovative strategies will be needed to support the introduction of new products.

Coherence

A Sense of the Whole

When you create cohesive flow, you take the first step toward helping readers feel that your prose hangs together. But they will judge you to be a competent writer only when they also feel that your writing has *coherence*, a quality different from *cohesion*. It's easy to confuse these words because they sound alike.

- Cohesion is when pairs of sentences fit together the way two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle do (recall the black hole example).
- Coherence is when all the sentences in a piece of writing add up to a larger whole, the way all the pieces in a puzzle add up to the picture on the box.

This next passage has good cohesive flow because we move from one sentence to the next without a hitch:

Sayner, Wisconsin, is the snowmobile capital of the world. The buzzing of snowmobile engines fills the air, and their tank-like tracks crisscross the snow. The snow reminds me of Mom's mashed potatoes, covered with furrows I would draw with my fork. Her mashed potatoes usually make me sick—that's why I play with them. I like to make a hole in the middle of the potatoes and fill it with melted butter. This behavior has been the subject of long chats between my analyst and me.

Though its individual sentences are cohesive, that passage as a whole is incoherent. (It was created by six different writers, one of whom wrote the first sentence, with the other five sequentially adding one sentence, knowing only the immediately preceding one.) It is incoherent for three reasons:

1. The subjects of the sentences are entirely unrelated.

2. The sentences share no common themes or ideas.
3. The paragraph has no one sentence that states what the whole passage is about.

I will discuss that second point in [Lesson 6](#) and the third one in [Lesson 8](#). The rest of this lesson focuses on the first point, shared subjects.

Subjects and Topics

For 500 years, English teachers have defined *subject* in two ways:

1. The “doer” of the action
2. What a sentence is “about” or “comments” on, its topic

In [Lessons 3](#) and [4](#), we saw why that first definition doesn’t work: the subjects of many sentences are not doers. Here, for example, the subject is an action: *The **explosion** was loud.* Here it is a quality: ***Correctness** is not writing’s highest virtue.* Here it is just a grammatical placeholder: ***It** was a dark and stormy night.*

But also flawed is that second definition: *A subject is what a sentence is about.* It is flawed because, often, a sentence’s topic is stated elsewhere than in the grammatical subject.

For example, none of the main subjects in these sentences names their topics.

- The main subject of this sentence is *it*, but its topic is *your claim*, the object of the preposition *for*:

*It is impossible for **your claim** to be proved.*

- The subject of this sentence is *I*, but its topic is *this question*, the object of *to*:

*In regard to **this question**, I believe more research is needed.*

- The subject of this sentence is *it*, but its topic is *our proposal*, the subject of a verb in a subordinate clause:

It is likely that **our proposal** will be accepted.

- The subject of this sentence is *no one*, but its topic is *such results*, a direct object shifted to the front for emphasis:

Such results *no one* could have predicted.

Topics and Coherence

A sentence's topic does not have to be its grammatical subject, although in writing that is clear and coherent, it often is. *Topic* is not a grammatical term but a psychological one: it refers to the idea that readers expect the sentence to be “about” or “comment” on. Readers expect to find this idea stated toward the beginning of the sentence.

Readers consider a passage coherent to the degree that they can quickly and easily see two things:

- the topics of individual sentences and clauses
- how the topics in the passage make up a related set of concepts

How does this passage strike you?

Consistent ideas toward the beginnings of sentences, especially in their subjects, help readers understand what a passage is generally about. A sense of coherence arises when a sequence of topics comprises a narrow set of related ideas. But the context of each sentence is lost by seemingly random shifts of topics. Unfocused paragraphs result when that happens.

The passage seems choppy and disorganized because the topics of its sentences are inconsistent and diffuse. They do not focus our attention on a limited set of related ideas:

Consistent ideas toward the beginnings of sentences, especially in their subjects, help readers understand what a passage is generally about. A sense of coherence arises when a sequence of topics comprises a narrow set of related ideas. But the context of each sentence is lost by seemingly random shifts of topics. Unfocused, even disorganized paragraphs result when that happens.

Now compare that passage to this revision, with the new topics boldfaced:

Readers understand what a passage is generally about when **they** see consistent ideas toward the beginnings of sentences, especially in their subjects. **They** feel a passage is coherent when **they** read a sequence of topics that focuses on a narrow set of related ideas. But when **topics** seem to shift randomly, **readers** lose the context of each sentence. When **that** happens, **they** feel they are reading paragraphs that are unfocused and even disorganized.

The subjects of sentences and clauses focus our attention on just two concepts—*readers* and *topics*—and form a strong topic string: *readers, they, they, they, topics, readers, that, they [readers]*. That is why this passage seems more coherent.

How to Revise: Topics

Here is how to analyze and revise your writing so it is coherent.

1. Analyze

1. Underline the first seven or eight words of every sentence in a passage, stopping when you hit a verb.
2. If you can, underline the first five or six words of every clause in those sentences.

2. Assess

1. Do the underlined words constitute a relatively small set of related

Lesson 8 Global Coherence

One of the most difficult things [to write] is the first paragraph. I have spent many months on a first paragraph, and once I get it, the rest just comes out very easily. In the first paragraph you solve most of the problems with your book. The theme is defined, the style, the tone.

—Gabriel García Márquez

Understanding Global Coherence

In the last lesson, I explained how to create an introduction that does two things:

- Motivates your readers by stating a problem that they care about.
- Frames the rest of your document by stating the point and key concepts that you will develop in what follows.

In this lesson, I explain how that second point applies to all the parts of your document—its sections, subsections, and even paragraphs. Like the term *clear*, the term *coherent* doesn't refer to anything we find on the page. Coherence is an experience we create for ourselves as we make sense out of what we read.

What we look for on the page are signals that help us integrate what we are reading with the knowledge we already have. Your readers will understand your writing better and more easily when you build those signals into it deliberately. This lesson explains how to do that.

Forecasting Themes to Create Coherence

In [Lessons 5](#) and [6](#), we looked at those features that help readers create *local* coherence in short passages, but readers need more to grasp the *global* coherence of a whole document. To help them, you can use a by-now-familiar principle: begin each section or subsection of a document with a short, easily grasped segment that states its point and introduces the themes that organize the longer segment that follows, the body. Then in that body, support, develop, or explain that point and those themes.

To help readers grasp the coherence of a document and its sections, follow these six principles:

For the document:

1. Readers must know where the introduction ends and the body begins, as well as where each section ends and the next begins. Identify the start of each new section with a heading that includes the key themes for that section (see 5 below). If your field does not use headings, delete them for the final draft.
2. At the end of the introduction, readers look for the document's main point, claim, or solution to its problem, which should state the main themes developed in the rest. If you have good reason to save your main point for the conclusion, end your introduction with a sentence that promises the point to come *and* states the main themes.
3. In the body, readers look for the concepts announced as themes at the end of the introduction, using them to organize their understanding of the whole. Be sure that you repeat those themes regularly.

For each section and subsection:

4. Readers look for a short segment that introduces the section or subsection.
5. At the end of that introductory segment, readers look for a sentence that states both the *point* of the section and the specific concepts you will develop as distinctive themes for that section.
6. In the body of the section, readers look for the concepts announced as themes at the end of the introductory segment, using them to organize their understanding of that section. Be sure that you repeat them regularly.

Quick Tip

You can use these six principles to prepare yourself to read a difficult document. First, highlight the question in the problem statement and the main claim that answers it (see pp. [96–101](#)). Next, for each section, highlight its introduction, point, and key concepts. If you don't find them in the introduction to a section, look for them at the end of the section. Finally, read through just the parts that you highlighted. When you then begin reading in detail, you will have in mind an overview that will help you better understand and remember the rest.

In the limited space we have here, I can't illustrate these principles with entire documents or even long sections. So I will use paragraphs and ask you to relate their structure to that of a whole section of a document.

For example, read this:

1a. Thirty sixth-grade students wrote essays that were analyzed to determine the effectiveness of eight weeks of training to distinguish fact from opinion. That ability is an important aspect of making sound arguments of any kind. In

an essay written before instruction began, the writers failed almost completely to distinguish fact from opinion. In an essay written after four weeks of instruction, the students visibly attempted to distinguish fact from opinion, but did so inconsistently. In three more essays, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently, but never achieved the predicted level of performance. In a final essay written six months after instruction ended, they did no better than they did in their pre-instruction essays. Their training had some effect on their writing during the instruction period, but it was inconsistent, and six months after instruction it had no measurable effect.

The first few sentences introduce the rest, but we don't see in them the key concepts that follow: *inconsistently, never achieved, no better, no measurable effect*. Those terms are crucial to the *point* of the whole passage. Worse, the passage doesn't give us that point until the very end: training had no long-term effect. And so as we read, the passage seems to ramble, until the end, when we learn what we need to know to make sense of it retrospectively. But that takes more effort than we should have to expend.

Compare this version:

1b. In this study, thirty sixth-grade students were taught to distinguish fact from opinion. They did so successfully during the instruction period, but the effect was inconsistent and less than predicted, and six months after instruction ended, the instruction had no measurable effect. In an essay written before instruction began, the writers failed almost completely to distinguish fact from opinion. In an essay written after four weeks of instruction, the students visibly attempted to distinguish fact from opinion, but did so inconsistently. In three more essays, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently, but never achieved the predicted level of performance. In a final essay written six months after instruction ended, they did no better than they did in their pre-instruction essay. We thus conclude that short-term training to distinguish fact from opinion has no consistent or long-term effect.

In (1b), we quickly grasp that the first two sentences introduce what follows. And in the second sentence, we see two things: both the point of the passage (underlined) and its key terms (**boldfaced**):

1b. In this study, thirty sixth-grade students were taught to distinguish fact from opinion. They did so **successfully** during the instruction period, but the effect was **inconsistent** and **less than predicted**, and six months after instruction ended, the instruction had **no measurable effect**.

Consequently, we feel the passage hangs together better, and we read it with more understanding.

Now imagine two documents: in one, the point of each section and of the whole appears at its *end* (as in 1a) and what openings there are do not introduce the key terms that follow; in the other, each point appears in an *introductory* segment to every paragraph, section, and of the whole (as in 1b). Which would be easier to read and understand? The second, of course.

Keep in mind this principle: put the point sentence at the *end* of the short opening segment; make it the *last* sentence that your reader reads before starting the longer, more complex segment that follows.

- In a paragraph, the introductory segment might be just a single sentence, so by default, it will be the last sentence readers read before they read what follows. If the paragraph has a *two-sentence* introduction (as did 1b), be sure that its point is the *second* sentence, still making it the last thing readers read before they read the rest.
- For sections, your introduction might be a paragraph or more. For a whole document, you might need several paragraphs. Even in those cases, put your point sentence at the end of that introductory segment, no matter how long it is. Make your point the last thing readers read before they begin reading the longer, more complex segments that follow.

Some inexperienced writers think that if they reveal their main point in their introduction, readers will be bored and not read on. Not true. If you motivate readers with an interesting problem, they will want to see how you address it.

Here's the Point:

To write a document that readers will think is coherent, open every unit—section, subsection, and the whole—with a short, easily grasped introductory segment. At the end of that opening segment, put a sentence that states both the point of the unit and the key concepts that follow. Such “point” sentences constitute the outline of your document, its logical structure. If readers miss them, they may judge your writing to be incoherent.

Two More Requirements for Coherence

We can make sense of almost anything we read if we know its points. But to make full sense of a passage, we must see two more things.

1. Readers must see how everything in a section or whole is *relevant* to its point. Consider this passage:

We analyzed essays written by sixth-grade students to determine the effectiveness of training in distinguishing fact from opinion. In an essay written before training, the students failed almost completely to distinguish fact and opinion. These essays were also badly organized in several ways. In the first two essays after training began, the students attempted to distinguish fact from opinion, but did so inconsistently. They also produced fewer spelling and punctuation errors. In the essays four through seven, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently, but in their final essay, written six months after completion of instruction, they did no better than they did in their first essay. Their last essay was significantly longer than their first one, however. Their training thus had some effect on their writing during the training period, but it was inconsistent and transient.

What are those sentences about spelling, organization, and length doing there? When readers can't see the relevance of sentences to a point, they are likely to judge what they read as being incoherent.

Unfortunately, I can't give you a simple rule of relevance, because it's so abstract a quality. I can only list its most important kinds. Sentences are relevant to a point when they offer these:

- background or context
- points of sections and the whole

- reasons supporting a point
 - evidence, facts, or data supporting a reason
 - an explanation of reasoning or methods
 - consideration of other points of view
2. **Readers must see how the parts of your document are ordered.** Readers want to see not just how everything they read is relevant to a point, but what principle is behind the order of its parts. We look for three kinds of order: chronological, coordinate, and logical.
- **Chronological** This is the simplest order, from earlier to later (or vice versa), as a narrative or as cause and effect. Signal time with *first, then, finally*; signal cause and effect with *as a result, because of that*, and so on. The passage about the essay research was chronologically organized.
 - **Coordinate** Two or more sections are coordinate when they are like pillars equally supporting a common roof. *There are three reasons why. . .* Order those sections so that their sequence makes sense to your reader—by importance, complexity, and so on—then signal that order with words and phrases such as *first, second, . . .* or *also, another, more important, in addition*, and so on. That’s how this section on order is organized.
 - **Logical** This is the most complex order: by example and generalization (or vice versa), premise and conclusion (or vice versa), or by assertion and contradiction. Signal logic with *for example, on the other hand, it follows that. . .*

Quick Tip

Writers often order their documents chronologically because that is easiest for them. Once you have drafted a paper, read it through to see whether you have organized it simply as a narrative of your thinking. If you have, consider

revising. Order your ideas not in the way that is easiest for you, but in the way that best helps your readers understand them.

On Paragraphs

In different kinds of writing, paragraphs follow different conventions. In newspaper articles, they are often only a sentence long. In this book, they are a bit longer. In academic papers and scholarly journal articles, they can run half a page or more. Here is some advice that will help you write coherent longer paragraphs:

- Begin with one or two short, easily grasped sentences that frame what follows.
- State the point of the paragraph (in traditional terms its *topic sentence*) in the last sentence of its introduction. If the introduction is just one sentence, it will be its point by default.
- Toward the end of that point sentence, name the key themes that thread through what follows.

Treat this advice as general guidance, not as a rigid template. Many longer paragraphs don't follow this tidy structure, and we get through them just fine. Even so, most begin with some kind of opening segment that frames what follows by introducing key themes and perhaps by stating the point. If the point doesn't appear at the beginning of a paragraph, it will usually come at the end.

Compare these two examples:

2a. The team obtained exact sequences of fossils—new lines of antelopes, giraffes, and elephants developing out of old and appearing in younger strata, then dying out as they were replaced by others in still later strata. The most specific sequences they reconstructed were several lines of pigs that had been common at the site and had developed rapidly. The team produced family trees that dated types of pigs so accurately that when they found pigs next to fossils of questionable age, they could use the pigs to date the fossils. By mapping every fossil precisely, the team was able to recreate exactly how and

when the animals in a whole ecosystem evolved.

2b. By precisely mapping every fossil they found, the team was able to recreate exactly how and when the animals in a whole ecosystem evolved. They charted new lines of antelopes, giraffes, and elephants developing out of old and appearing in younger strata, then dying out as they were replaced by others in still later strata. The most exact sequences they reconstructed were several lines of pigs that had been common at the site and had developed rapidly. The team produced family trees that dated types of pigs so accurately that when they found pigs next to fossils of questionable age, they could use the pigs to date the fossils.

Paragraph (2a) makes its point in the last sentence; paragraph (2b) in its first sentence. Reading these paragraphs in isolation, you probably found (2b) slightly easier to understand. But in the context of an otherwise coherent text about fossil hunters and their work, (2a) probably wouldn't give you a problem.

If you have framed and organized your document and its sections well, your readers can make their way through a few paragraphs that are less than perfect. But if they don't know what your paragraphs are supposed to add up to, then no matter how well written they are individually, your readers may well feel lost.

A General Principle of Clarity

This general principle implies many of our others. It applies to individual sentences, to longer paragraphs, to sections and subsections, and to whole documents:

Readers are more likely to judge as clear any unit of writing that opens with a short segment that they can easily grasp and that frames the longer and more complex segment that follows.

Sentences: In a simple sentence, that short, easily grasped segment is a subject/topic. Compare these two:

1a. Resistance in Nevada against its use as a waste disposal site has been heated.

1b. Nevada has heatedly resisted its use as a waste disposal site.

In a complex sentence, that short, easily grasped segment is a main clause that expresses the point of its sentence. Compare these two:

2a. Greater knowledge of pre-Columbian civilizations and the effect of European colonization destroying their societies by inflicting on them devastating diseases has led to a historical reassessment of Columbus's role in world history.

2b. Historians are reassessing Columbus's role in world history because they know more about pre-Columbian civilizations and how European colonization destroyed their societies by inflicting on them devastating diseases.

The point of sentence (2a) is buried at its end. In (2b), the opening clause states the main point of the sentence, its most important claim: *Historians are reassessing Columbus's role in world history*. That claim is then supported by the longer and more complex clause that follows.

Paragraphs: In a paragraph, that short, easily grasped unit is an introductory sentence or two that both expresses the point of the paragraph and introduces its key concepts. Compare these two paragraphs:

3a. Thirty sixth-grade students wrote essays that were analyzed to determine the effectiveness of eight weeks of training to distinguish fact from opinion. That ability is an important aspect of making sound arguments of any kind. In an essay written before instruction began, the writers failed almost completely to distinguish fact from opinion. In an essay written after four weeks of instruction, the students visibly attempted to distinguish fact from opinion, but did so inconsistently. In three more essays, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently, but never achieved the predicted level. In a final essay written six months after instruction ended, they did no better than they did in their pre-instruction essay. Their training had some effect on their writing during the instruction period, but it was inconsistent, and six months after instruction it had no measurable effect.

3b. In this study, thirty sixth-grade students were taught to distinguish fact from opinion. They did so **successfully** during the instruction period, but the effect was **inconsistent** and **less than predicted**, and six months after instruction ended, the instruction had **no measurable effect**.

opening segment/point In an essay written before instruction began, the writers failed almost completely to distinguish fact from opinion. In an essay written after four weeks of instruction, the students visibly attempted to distinguish fact from opinion, but did so inconsistently. In three more essays, they distinguished fact from opinion more consistently, but never achieved the predicted level. In a final essay written six months after instruction ended, they did no better than they did in their pre-instruction essay. We thus conclude that short-term training to distinguish fact from opinion has no consistent or long-term effect.

Paragraph (3a) has no clearly distinguished opening unit, and it does not announce the key themes of the paragraph. Paragraph (3b) has a clearly marked opening unit that states the point, and it clearly announces the key themes of the paragraph.

Sections: In a section or subsection, that short, easily grasped unit may be just

a paragraph; in longer units, it will be proportionally longer. Even so, at its end it expresses the point of its unit and introduces the key concepts that follow. There is not enough space here to illustrate how that principle applies to a passage several paragraphs long, but it is easy to imagine.

Whole documents: In a whole document, that introductory unit might be one or more paragraphs long, perhaps even a few pages. Even so, it should be substantially shorter than the rest, and in a sentence at its end, it should state the point of the whole document and introduces its key concepts.

Quick Tip

Budget your time for both drafting and revision so that you spend most of it on beginnings: the introduction to the whole, then the introductions to major sections, then introductions to subsections and long paragraphs, then the beginnings of sentences. Get beginnings straight, and the rest is likely to take care of itself.

The Costs and Benefits of Templated Writing

Some writers fear that patterns like these will inhibit their creativity and bore their readers. That's a reasonable concern, if you are writing a literary essay that explores your own thoughts as you have them, for readers who have the time and patience to follow the twists and turns of your thinking. If you are writing that kind of essay for that kind of reader, go to it. Don't tie yourself to what I've said here.

On most occasions, however, most of us read less for aesthetic pleasures than to understand what we need to know. You help readers toward this end when you follow the principles of clarity and coherence we've looked at in Parts Two and Three of this book.

Such writing may seem formulaic—to *you*, because *you* will be so conscious

of the patterns you followed. But it earns the gratitude of readers who have too little time to read, understand, and remember everything they must and who will, in any event, focus more on understanding the substance of your writing than on critiquing its form.

In Your Own Words

Exercise 8.1

1. A basic principle of clarity is that any unit of discourse—a sentence, a paragraph, a section, a whole document—should begin with a short segment that introduces and frames the longer and more complex segment that follows. Go through a piece of your writing section by section. Draw a line after that short segment and circle words in that segment that signal key themes in what follows. If you cannot, revise.

Exercise 8.2

1. To feel a document (or a section of one) is coherent, a reader needs to understand how it is organized (review pp. [113–114](#)). But writers, especially in early drafts, often organize their documents in the way that is easiest for them, not the way that is best for their readers. Specifically, writers often adopt a chronological or narrative structure by default. You can see why this is so. When getting ideas down on paper, it is easiest for writers simply to rehearse their thinking or research. But most often, readers do not want to hear a story of discovery but to understand a writer's points. Revising for global coherence, therefore, often involves translating a document from a chronological or narrative structure to a coordinate or logical one. A reader can help you do this.

Go through a document or section that you have organized chronologically. Highlight your points, paragraph by paragraph, and copy them onto index cards. Shuffle the cards and give them to a reader. Have a reader put the cards into what seems like their right order. Reorganize your document or section so that it follows that order. What did you have to change?

Summing Up

Plan your paragraphs, sections, and the whole on this model:

Researchers have made strides in the **early and accurate diagnosis** of *Alzheimer's*, [but those **diagnoses** have raised a new human problem about **informing those at risk** before they show any *symptoms of it*.]_{point}

Open each unit with a relatively short segment introducing it.

End that segment with a sentence stating the point of that unit.

Toward the end of that point sentence, use key themes that the rest of the unit develops.

Not too long ago, when physicians examined an older patient who seemed *out of touch with reality*, they had to **guess** whether that person had *Alzheimer's* or was *only senile*. In the past few years, however, they have been able to use **new and more reliable tests** focusing on genetic clues. But in **the accuracy of these new tests** lies the risk of another kind of human tragedy: physicians may be able to **predict** *Alzheimer's* long before its overt appearance, but such an **early diagnosis** could psychologically devastate an apparently healthy person.

In the longer segment that follows, use consistent topics (underlined).

Repeat key terms introduced toward the end of the opening segment (boldfaced, italicized, and capitalized).

Make every sentence follow the old-new principle.

Order sentences, paragraphs, and sections in a way that readers understand.

Make all sentences relevant to the point of the unit that they constitute.