

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF SENTENCE READABILITY

Whether readers understand what we write obviously depends on many factors. First, they probably need to possess some basic background information about the subject (including the meaning of particular terms). Second, they must have some vested interest in understanding our writing (i.e., we have to interest them in what we have to say). Third, they must share or be aware of the expectations and knowledge of the discourse (spelling, syntax, punctuation). As if that were not enough, readers also must remember what they read as they go and maintain their concentration as they translate our words into thoughts and images.

A reader's task is difficult enough without our making it more difficult by not following some basic principles of readability. Our word choices will affect readability, depending upon our audience's familiarity with them, but so will the structure of our sentences—our style. The principles below may help writers communicate more clearly and effectively (when those are the goals--sometimes writers want to make the reading more difficult, possibly for legitimate reasons). Bear in mind also that these principles should not be considered "rules," but general guidelines to follow unless circumstances demand some alternative. (You should have a reason for deviating from these principles: for example, sometimes you'll need a passive sentence to maintain coherence, suppress an agent, or stress new information.)

1. Use an agent/action style: sentences that follow the natural word-order of English (subject-verb-object, or S-V-O) can be understood more readily than transformations of that order (as occur in passive construction); in addition, readers understand sentences better when the verb is an action and the agent performing the action precedes it.

Agent/Action: John hit the ball.

Passive: The ball was hit by John. **or** The ball was hit.

2. Keep the agent and action close together in the sentence.

Better: Joan hit the ball, knowing that her team depended on her.

Worse: Joan, knowing that her team depended on her, hit the ball.

3. Put modifiers close to the words they modify.

Better: Feeling satisfaction for the first time in his miserable life, Fred caught the ball that John hit.

Worse: Fred caught the ball that John hit, feeling satisfaction for the first time in his miserable life.

4. Put old information first, new or important information last in a sentence.

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

(Notice how the new information (italicized) begins subsequent sentence as old information (underlined)).

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

(Notice here how the second sentence begins with new information, which not only makes the passage read awkwardly but also taxes short-term memory. The passages come from Williams's Style, 117.)

5. When possible, put characters in the agent position in a sentence.

Better: Hitchcock implicates the viewer in Norman's Oedipal guilt.
Worse: Hitchcock's implication is that the viewer shares Norman's Oedipal guilt.

(Note here that the second sentence needs an "is that" because the subject of the sentence is a noun phrase--"Hitchcock's implication" rather than "Hitchcock.")

The Five Principles (once again)

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3. Put modifiers close to the words they modify.
4. Put old information first, new or important information last in a sentence.
5. When possible, put characters in the agent position in a sentence.

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