



Sentence Clarity: Help your Reader!

When you write, it is your job to make things clear for the reader. The following tips may help you accomplish that goal.

Go from old to new information:

To make reading your prose easier for your reader, you should move in your sentences and paragraphs from old information, what your reader already knows, to new information.

Try to put the following sentences into a coherent paragraph with new information following old.

1. The full length of one of its long sides is affixed to a twig; the side that catches the light is perfectly flat.
2. As I write I can see the one I tied to the mock orange hedge outside my study window.
3. I have just learned to see praying mantis egg cases.
4. I carried it home this afternoon, holding it carefully by the twig, along with several others—they were light as air.
5. Suddenly I see them everywhere; a tan oval of light catches my eye, or I notice a blob of thickness in a patch of slender weeds.
6. I dropped one without missing it until I got home and made a count.
7. It is over an inch long and shaped like a bell, or like the northern hemisphere of an egg cut through its equator.
8. It has a dead straw, deadweed color, and a curious brittle texture, hard as varnish, but pitted minutely, like frozen foam.

Here's what the paragraph originally looked like, with the sentences generally starting with the old and moving to the new: I have just learned to see praying mantis egg cases. Suddenly I see them everywhere; a tan oval of light catches my eye, or I notice a blob of thickness in a patch of slender weeds. As I write I can see the one I tied to the mock orange hedge outside my study window. It is over an inch long and shaped like a bell, or like the northern hemisphere of an egg cut through its equator. The full length of one of its long sides is affixed to a twig; the side that catches the light is perfectly flat. It has a dead straw, deadweed color, and a curious brittle texture, hard as varnish, but pitted minutely, like frozen foam. I carried it home this afternoon, holding it carefully by the twig, along with several others—they were light as air. I dropped one without missing it until I got home and made a count.

Annie Dillard's "The Fixed" *Life Writing*. Ed. Winifred Bryan Horner. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall 1997. (321-327).

Put modifiers, including words, phrases, and clauses, near whatever they modify.

Move the modifiers in the following sentences to make the meaning clearer.

We wanted the movie to end wholeheartedly.

Writers who use active verbs authoritatively write better.

I only want to come after I have gone to the other party.

We just want the new students to stand up.

Put like ideas in like grammatical form.

Not parallel: She wants to know the answer, how to do the problem, and the grade.

Parallel: She wants to be happy, to be useful, to be admired.

Parallel: What weight-training is to your body, liberal arts is to your mind. Both make you stronger, prepare you for performing with ease, and prevent the injury likely from sole focus on a narrow area.

Avoid using long strings of nouns as adjectives modifying other nouns.

Noun string: The biology prairie grass mowing and burning experiment

Noun string untangled: The biology experiment comparing mowing and burning prairie grass

Noun string: The doctoral dissertation reading committee

Noun string untangled: The committee for reading the doctoral dissertation

Beware of overusing nominalizations, nouns made out of verbs.

Try fixing the following sentences:

Action must be taken in avoidance of variations in the prioritization of the tasks.

The eruption of the anger internalized within the crowd was obvious during the meeting.

Beware of overusing negatives in your sentences:

Try fixing the following sentences:

This is not to deny that you are not wanted.

He neglected to avoid delaying the test.

Help your reader by transforming the demonstrative pronoun *this* into an adjective.

He wanted to go to the store. This made his parents anxious.

He wanted to go to the store. This strange ambition made his parents anxious.

He wanted to go to the store. This unusual monomania made his parents anxious.

He wanted to go to the store. This perverse persistence made his parents anxious.

He wanted to go to the store. This idealized ambition made his parents anxious.

And just to give you an example of how longer sentences are not necessarily better:

Press here.

Apply pressure here.

The application of pressure here is desirable.

The desirability of the application of pressure here is high.

The height of the desirability of the application of pressure here is clear.

The clarity of the height of the desirability of the application of pressure here is manifest.

The manifest nature of the clarity of the height of the desirability of the application of pressure here is unarguable.