

## APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES: EXAMPLES

### THE SENTENCE

1. *Use specific verbs to express the crucial actions, and make the subjects of your verbs the characters involved in those actions.*

- You may have been told to write concretely.

A sentence which turns verbs into nouns (nominalization) and obscures the characters is filled with abstraction.

There has been an affirmative decision for grant extension.

When we use subjects to name the characters and verbs to name their actions, we write more concretely.

The NIH decided to extend Jansky's grant.

- You may have been told to avoid using too many prepositional phrases.

An evaluation of the evidence by us, with the new techniques available, will allow a more precise determination of the origin of the new species.

When we use verbs instead of abstract nouns, we eliminate many prepositional phrases.

Using our new techniques, we will evaluate the evidence so that we can discern more precisely the new species's origin.

- You may have been told to avoid the passive voice.

It was recently found that several basic features of skeletal anatomy were shared by the two groups.

When we name characters and actions with subjects and verbs, we tend to write more active sentences, leading to a style that is more vigorous and direct.

We recently found that the two groups share several basic features of skeletal anatomy.

- You may have been told to write short sentences.

There's nothing wrong with long sentences. But typically, when we align characters and actions with subjects and verbs, we write shorter sentences.

2. Put at the beginning of the sentence (the topic position) familiar/less important/simpler information.

3. Put at the end of the sentence (the stress position) new/more important/more complex information.

And therefore, it is important to note, that from a practical point of view, it is difficult to detect unambiguous evidence that shows natural selection operating on short time scales.

Sometimes such extended transitions and introductions are helpful, but we typically subordinate those elements of the sentence in favor of announcing the topic as saliently as possible. Compare:

Empirically detecting natural selection over short time scales is difficult.

Designing a study that can detect natural selection over short time scales is difficult.

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Sociobiologists are making the provocative claim that our genes largely determine our social behavior in the way we act in situations we find around us every day.

We can trim the ending here to make the point more salient.

Sociobiologists are making the provocative claim that our genes largely determine our social behavior.

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The data that have been offered to demonstrate sympatric speciation do not convince us for the most part.

For the most part, the data that have been offered to demonstrate sympatric speciation do not convince us.

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About 65 million years ago, this planet experienced a significant asteroid or cometary impact that drastically altered the environment.

About 65 million years ago, the environment on this planet was drastically altered by a significant asteroid or cometary impact.

Note the use of the passive voice here. The main reason that the passive exists is to allow control of topic and emphasis. Neither of these is right or wrong. What matters is how the emphasis reinforces or degrades coherence in the paragraph containing these sentences.

## THE PARAGRAPH

1. Among groups of related sentences, maintain a consistent and coherent sequence of *topic strings*, if you can. The topic strings need not be identical, but they should present a sequence of ideas the your reader sees as focused and supporting your point.

In this paragraph, **boldface** indicates topic strings. **Particular ideas toward the beginning of each clause** define what a passage is centrally “about” for a reader, so **a sense of coherence** crucially depends on topic strings. Cumulatively **the thematic signposts that are provided by these ideas** should focus the reader’s attention toward a well-defined and limited set of connected ideas. **Moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view** is made possible by a sequence of topics that seem to constitute this coherent sequence of topicalized ideas. **A seeming absence of context for each sentence** is one consequence of making random shifts in topics. **Feelings of dislocation, disorientation, and lack of focus** will occur when **that** happens. **The seeming coherence of whole sections** will turn on a reader’s point of view as a result of topic announcement.

Compare the following:

In this paragraph, **I** have boldfaced the topic strings in every clause. **Topics** are crucial for a reader because **they** focus the reader’s attention on a particular idea toward the beginning of a clause and thereby notify a reader what **a clause** is “about.” **Topics** thereby crucially determine whether **the reader** will feel **a passage** is coherent. Cumulatively, through a series of sentences, **these topicalized ideas** provide thematic signposts that focus the reader’s attention on a well-defined set of connected ideas. If **a sequence of topics** seems coherent, **that consistent sequence** will move the reader through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view. But if through that paragraph **topics** shift randomly, then **the reader** has to begin each sentence out of context, from no coherent point of view. When **that** happens, **the reader** will feel dislocated, disoriented, out of focus. **Whatever the writer announces as a topic**, then, will fix the readers point of view, not just toward the rest of the sentence, but toward whole sections.

2. Choose your topic strings to control your reader's perception of agency, action, and viewpoint.

Four score and seven years ago **our fathers** brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that **all men** are created equal.

Now **we** are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether **that nation** or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. **We** are met on a great battlefield of that war. **We** have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for **those who** here gave their lives that **that nation** might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that **we** should do this.

But in a larger sense, **we** cannot dedicate, **we** cannot consecrate, **we** cannot hallow this ground. **The brave men**, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. **The world** will little note nor long remember what **we** say here, but it can never forget what **they** did here. It is for **us the living** rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which **they who fought here** have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for **us** to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead **we** take increased devotion to that cause for which **they** gave the last full measure of devotion—that **we** here highly resolve that **these dead** shall not have died in vain, that **this nation** under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that **government of the people, by the people, for the people** shall not perish from the earth.

Compare a plausible rewrite with a coherent topical viewpoint:

Four score and seven years ago, **this continent** witnessed the birth of a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition of our fathers that all men are created equal. Now, **this great Civil War** that engages us is testing whether **that nation or any nation** so conceived and dedicated can long endure.

**The War** created this great battlefield. **A portion of it** is now to be dedicated as the final resting place for those who here gave their lives that this nation might live. **This** is altogether a proper and fitting thing to do. But in a larger sense, **this ground** will not let us dedicate, consecrate, or hallow it. **It** has already taken that consecration from the brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, far above our poor power to add or detract. **Our words** will be little noted nor long remembered, but **their actions** will never pass from human memory.

Why might Lincoln have chosen the topic strings he did?

3. A cohesive paragraph has a consistent set of *thematic strings* running through it.

Clark's practice of carefully mapping every fossil made it possible to follow the evolutionary development of various types through time. Beautiful sequences of antelopes, giraffes, and elephants were obtained, new species evolving out of old and appearing in younger strata. In short, evolution was taking place before the eyes of the Omo surveyors, and they could time it. The finest examples of this process were in several lines of pigs which had been common at Omo and had developed rapidly. Unsnarling the pig story was turned over to paleontologist Basil Cooke. He produced family trees for pigs whose various types were so accurately dated pigs themselves became measuring sticks that could be applied to fossils of questionable age in other places that had similar pigs.

– Johnson and Edey, *Lucy: The Beginnings of Humankind*

Notice how Johnson and Edy choose to topicalize the living characters in this story: **Clark** obtained; the **Omo surveyors** could see, **they** could time; **they** found examples . . .

But now look for the thematic strings within the paragraph. Identify (and even classify) the major concepts running through the paragraph.

Concepts:

1. ACTIONS OF SURVEYORS (map, follow, time)
2. *Types of fossils* (fossils, giraffes, . . .)
3. **Actions of species** (evolve, appear, die, replace)
4. Time

Clark's PRACTICE OF CAREFULLY MAPPING every *fossil* made it possible to follow the evolutionary development of various types through time. Beautiful **sequences** of *antelopes, giraffes, and elephants* were OBTAINED, new species **evolving** out of old and **appearing** in younger strata. In short, evolution was taking place before the eyes of the Omo surveyors, and they could TIME it. The finest examples of this process were in several lines of *pigs* which had been **common** at Omo and had **developed** rapidly. UNSNARLING the *pig* story was TURNED OVER to paleontologist Basil Cooke. He PRODUCED FAMILY TREES for *pigs* whose various types were so ACCURATELY DATED *pigs* themselves became MEASURING STICKS THAT COULD BE APPLIED to *fossils* of questionable age in other places that had similar *pigs*.

– Johnson and Edey, *Lucy: The Beginnings of Humankind*