

Well begun is half done.

Anonymous

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 Quincy

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said, gravely, “and go on till you come to the end; then stop.”

Lewis Carroll

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Cohesion

Clarity and Context

So far, we've discussed clear writing as if we wrote only individual sentences, independent of context or intention; as if we could directly map onto subjects and verbs the way characters and actions appear to us as we directly experience the world. And it's true—if we mechanically arranged characters and their apparent actions so that they matched subjects and verbs, we would achieve a kind of local clarity.

But there is more to readable writing than local clarity. A series of clear sentences can still be confusing if we fail to design them to fit their context, to reflect a consistent point of view, to emphasize our most important ideas. These sentences could all refer to the same set of conditions, but each leads us to understand the conditions from a different point of view.

Congress finally agreed with the Secretary of State that if we ally ourselves with Saudi Arabia and Iran then attacks Kuwait, we will have to protect Kuwait.

The Secretary of State finally convinced Congress that if Kuwait comes under Iranian attack, it will need our protection if Saudi Arabia has acquired us as an ally.

The Secretary of State and Congress finally agreed that if we and Saudi Arabia become allies and Kuwait and Iran enter into hostilities initiated by Iran, then we and Kuwait will become allies in the hostilities.

The problem is to discover how, without sacrificing local clarity, we can shape sentences to fit their context and to reflect those larger intentions that motivate us to write in the first place.

In Chapters 1 and 2, we began explaining matters of style by trying first to refine the way we describe our responses to different kinds of prose. In those chapters, we described passages

such as the next one as “turgid” or “murky” (still keeping in mind that in fact we are describing not the prose but our feelings about it):

- 1a. To obligate a corporation upon a contract to another party, it must be proven that the contract was its act, whether by corporate action, that of an authorized agent, or by adoption or ratification and such ratification will be implied by the acquiescence or the acceptance of the benefits of such contract, it being essential to implied ratification that the acceptance be with knowledge of all pertinent facts.

Once we are aware of how we feel about a passage like this and conscious of the words we can use to describe those feelings, we know how to begin analyzing the passage so that we can revise it. First, who are the characters? Then what actions are they performing? To revise, we name the characters in subjects and actions in verbs:

- 1b. To prove that a corporation *is obligated* to another party, the other party *must prove* one of two conditions:
 - the corporation or its authorized agent explicitly *acted* to *enter* the contract, or
 - the corporation *adopted* or implicitly *ratified* the contract when, knowing all pertinent facts, it *acquiesced* in or *accepted* its benefits.

Now read this next pair of passages. How would you describe their differences?

- 2a. Asian competitors who have sought to compete directly with Acme's X-line product groups in each of six market segments in the Western Pacific region will constitute the main objective of the first phase of this study. The labor costs of Acme's competitors and their ability to introduce new products quickly define the issue we will examine in detail in each segment. A plan that will show Acme how to restructure its diverse and widespread facilities so that it can better exploit unexpected opportunities, particularly in the market on the Pacific Rim, should result.
- 2b. The first phase of this study will mainly examine six market segments in the Western Pacific region to determine how Asian competitors have sought to compete directly with Acme's X-line product groups. In each segment, the study will examine in detail their labor costs and their ability to in-

introduce new products quickly. The result will be a plan that will show Acme how to restructure its diverse and widespread facilities so that it can better exploit unexpected opportunities, particularly in the market on the Pacific Rim.

Passage (2b) is “clearer” than (2a), but to describe how it is clearer and what makes it so, we would have to use words different from those we used to describe the passages about corporate contracts. Neither (2a) nor (2b) has any problems with nominalizations; both have about the same number of characters as subjects of verbs. So (2a) is not more “turgid,” “abstract,” or “complex” than (2b). Most readers have described the first as “disjointed,” “abrupt,” “choppy,” as lacking in “flow”; (2b) as “flowing,” “connected,” and “cohesive.”

This chapter will explain these responses and suggest how to revise a passage like (2a) into a passage like (2b).

Managing the Flow of Information

Few principles of style are more widely repeated than “use the direct active voice, avoid the weak and indirect passive.” Not

- a. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble.

but rather,

- b. The collapse of a dead star into a point perhaps no larger than a marble creates a black hole.

But what if the context for either of those sentences was this:

- (1) Some astonishing questions about the nature of the universe have been raised by scientists exploring the nature of black holes in space. (2a/b) — (3) So much matter compressed into so little volume changes the fabric of space around it in profoundly puzzling ways.

Our sense of coherence should tell us that this context calls not for the active sentence, but for the passive. And the reasons are not far to seek: The last part of sentence (1) introduces one of the important characters in the story: black holes in space. If we write sentence (2) in the active voice, we cannot mention black holes again until its end, as the object of an active verb:

- (2b) The collapse of a dead star . . . creates a black hole.

We can improve the flow between sentences (1) and (2) if we shift that object in sentence (2)—a black hole—to the beginning of its own sentence, where it will echo the last few words of sentence (1). We can do that by making *black hole* the subject of a passive verb:

the nature of black holes in space. A black hole is created by the collapse of a dead star (or . . . when a dead star collapses).

By doing that, we also move to the end of sentence (2) the concept that will open sentence (3), and thereby create a tight conceptual link between those two sentences:

the nature of black holes in space. A black hole is created by the 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. . . .

The problem—and the challenge—of English prose is that, with every sentence we write, we have to strike the best compromise between the principles of local clarity and directness that we discussed in Chapter 2, and the principles of cohesion that fuse separate sentences into a whole discourse. But in that compromise, we must give priority to those features of style that make our discourse seem cohesive, those features that help the reader organize separate sentences into a single, unified whole.

We've illustrated two complementary principles of cohesion. One of them is this:

Put at the beginning of a sentence those ideas that you have already mentioned, referred to, or implied, or concepts that you can reasonably assume your reader is already familiar with, and will readily recognize.

The other principle is this:

Put at the end of your sentence the newest, the most surprising, the most significant information: information that you want to stress—perhaps the information that you will expand on in your next sentence.

As you begin a sentence, you have to prepare your readers for new and therefore important information. Give your readers a familiar context to help them move from the more familiar to the less familiar, from the known to the unknown.

All of us recognize this principle when a good teacher tries to

teach us something new. That teacher will always try to connect something we already know to whatever new we are trying to learn. Sentences work in the same way. Each sentence should teach your reader something new. To lead your reader to whatever will seem new *to that reader*, you have to begin that sentence with something that you can reasonably assume *that reader* already knows. How you begin sentences, then, is crucial to how easily your readers will understand them, not individually, but as they constitute a whole passage. But in designing sentences in this way, you must have some sense of what your reader already knows about your subject.

Beginning Well

It's harder to begin a sentence well than to end it well. As we'll see later, to end a sentence well, we need only decide which of our ideas is the newest, probably the most complex, and then imagine that complex idea at the end of its own sentence. The problem is merely to get there gracefully. On the other hand, every time we begin a sentence, we have to juggle three or four elements that typically occur early on.

1. To connect a sentence to the preceding one, we use transitional metadiscourse, such as *and*, *but*, *therefore*, *as a result*:
And therefore

2. To help readers evaluate what follows, we use expressions such as *fortunately*, *perhaps*, *allegedly*, *it is important to note*, *for the most part*, *under these circumstances*, *from a practical point of view*, *politically speaking*.

And therefore, it is important to note, that from a practical point of view. . . .

3. We locate action in time and place: *then*, *later*, *on May 23*, *in Europe*.

And therefore, it is important to note, that from a practical point of view, in the Northeastern states in recent years. . . .

4. And most important (note the evaluation), we announce at the beginning of a sentence its *topic*—the concept that we intend to say something about. We ordinarily name the topic of a sentence or clause in its subject:

And therefore, it is important to note, that from a practical point of view, in the Northeastern states in recent years, these sources of acid rain have been a matter of much concern. . . .

Your style will seem cohesive to the degree that you can subordinate the first three of the elements that open a sentence to the fourth, to its topic. If you begin sentences with the kind of throat-clearing introduction of the sentence above, your prose will seem not just uncertain, but unfocused. We will begin with topics, because they are centrally important in the ways readers read.

Topics: Psychological Subjects

The topic of a sentence is its *psychological* subject. The psychological subject of a sentence is that idea we announce in the first few words of a sentence. It is almost always a noun phrase of some kind that the rest of the sentence characterizes, comments on, says something about. In most English sentences, psychological subjects (topics), are also grammatical subjects:

Private higher education is seriously concerned about population trends through the end of the century.

The writer first announces the grammatical subject, *Private higher education*. As readers, we assume the writer is going to comment on, say something about that concept. In this sense, the sentence is “about” private higher education.

But we can create a topic out of the object of a verb if we shift that object to the beginning of its sentence, before the subject:

I cannot explain the reasons for this decision to end the treaty.

The reasons for this decision to end the treaty, I cannot explain.

We can also put topics in introductory phrases:

As for abortion, it is not clear how the Supreme Court will rule.

In regard to regulating religious cults, we must proceed cautiously.

Neither *abortion* nor *regulating religious cults* is the subject of its sentence. The main subject of the first is *it*, and of the second, *we*. If we ask what either of those sentences is really “about,” we would not say that the sentences were “about” their grammatical subjects, *it* or *we*. Those sentences are “about” their psycho-

logical subjects, their topics—abortion, and regulating religious cults.

Here's the point. In the clearest writing, the topics of most sentences and clauses are their grammatical subjects. But what's more important than their grammatical function is the way topics control how readers read sentences, not individually, but in sequences, and the way that writers must therefore organize *sequences* of those topics. The most important concern of a writer, then, is not the individual topics of individual sentences, but the cumulative effect of the sequence of topics.

The Role of Topics

In this paragraph, **boldface** indicate topics. 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 topics. 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 that with this.

In this paragraph, I have boldfaced the topics of 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 reader’s point of view, not just toward the rest of the sentence, but toward whole sections.

To most readers the original has no consistent focus, no consistent string of topics that focuses attention on a circumscribed set of concepts. So, as most readers feel dislocated, disoriented, or unfocused, they describe the passage as disjointed, choppy, lacking in “flow.” The revised version consistently focuses on fewer concepts: for the most part, some variation on *topics* and *reader*. It has a more consistent *topic string*, and therefore feels more focused, more cohesive.

This principle of a coherent topic string also helps us understand why we can be confused by one long sentence after another. Long sentences may not announce topics often enough or clearly enough to guide us through a multitude of ideas. We need topics as thematic signposts to help us assemble ideas in individual sentences and clauses into cohesive discourse.

This principle of using a consistent string of topics reinforces a point we made about characters and actions: When you design your sentences so that their subjects predictably name your central characters—real or abstract—and the verbs in those sentences name crucial actions, you are beginning your sentences from a point of view your readers will feel is consistent, from the point of view of your characters, the most familiar units of information in any story you tell. In fact, we can expand the graphic model that we offered in the last chapter:

TOPIC			FIXED
OLD INFORMATION		NEW INFORMATION	VARIABLE
SUBJECT	VERB	CONTEXT	FIXED
CHARACTERS	ACTION	—	VARIABLE

The secret to a clear and readable style is in the first five or six words of every sentence. At the beginning of every sentence, locate your reader in familiar territory; at the beginning of a series of sentences, create for your reader a reasonably consistent point of view, a consistent topic string. When that consistent topic

string consists of your cast of characters as subjects, and you immediately connect those subjects with verbs that express the crucial actions, you are a long way toward writing prose that your readers will perceive as clear, direct, and cohesive.

Keeping Topics Visible

We can now appreciate why a writer has to get most of his or her sentences off to a brisk start with an appropriate topic. We fail to do this when we introduce sentences with too much metadiscourse, that language we use when we write about our own writing or thinking. These next sentences appeared in a study of a college curriculum. I have italicized the metadiscourse and bold-faced what I believe should have been the topics.

We think it useful to provide some relatively detailed illustration of the varied ways “corporate curricular personalities” organize themselves in programs. We choose to feature as a central device in our presentation what are called “introductory,” “survey,” or “foundational” courses. It is important, however, to recognize the diversity of what occurs in programs after the different initial survey courses. But what is also suggested is that if one talks about a program simply in terms of the intellectual strategies or techniques engaged in, when these are understood in a general way, it becomes difficult to distinguish many programs from others.

Get rid of the metadiscourse, make the central character—programs—the topic, and we get a substantially more compelling claim:

Our programs create varied “corporate” curricular personalities, particularly through their “introductory,” “survey,” or “foundational” courses. After these initial courses, they continue to offer diverse curricula. *But* in these curricula they seem to employ similar intellectual strategies.

At this point, some of you may be recalling advice that you once received about avoiding “monotony”—vary how you begin your sentences, avoid beginning sentences with the same subjects. Bad advice.

Your prose will become monotonous for reasons more serious than repeated topics or subjects. It will be monotonous if you

write one short sentence after another, or one long sentence after another. Your prose will seem monotonous if you stuff it with nominalizations and passives.

You avoid monotony by saying what you have to say as clearly as you can, by so thoroughly engaging your readers in your ideas that they lose touch with the surface of your prose. Under any circumstances, because we ordinarily write “stories” with several different characters, we are unlikely to repeat the same words for the same characters at the beginning of several consecutive sentences. And even if we do, most readers will not notice.

At the risk of asking a question that might invite the wrong answer, did the revised paragraph about topics, the one with the consistent topics, seem more monotonous than the original (p. 51)? It has only two main topics: *topics* and *reader*. If, as you read the paragraph, your eyes did not glaze over (as a result of the prose style, at any rate), then we have settled the issue of monotony and consistent subjects.

Managing Subjects and Topics for Flow

English provides us with several ways to replace a long subject that expresses new information with a shorter segment that probably expresses information repeated from or referring to a previous sentence. Notice how, in each of the example sentences below, we move to the end a long subject that expresses new and therefore relatively more important information. Note as well that the shorter segment which we move to the beginning expresses older information, information that typically connects the reader to something that has gone before.

Passives again. As we have seen, an important role of the passive is to let us replace a long subject full of new information with a short one that locates the reader in the context of something more familiar:

During the first years of our nation, *a series of brilliant and virtuous presidents committed to a democratic republic yet confident in their own superior worth* conducted its administration.

During the first years of our nation, its administration was conducted by *a series of brilliant and virtuous presidents committed to a democratic republic yet confident in their own superior worth*.

Astronomers, physicists, and a host of other researchers entirely familiar with the problems raised by quasars have confirmed these observations.

These observations have been confirmed by *astronomers, physicists, and a host of other researchers entirely familiar with the problems raised by quasars*.

These sentences illustrate the main reason the passive exists in the language—to improve cohesion and emphasis.

Subject-complement switching. Sometimes, we simply switch the subject and complement, especially when what follows the linking verb *be* refers to something already mentioned:

The source of the American attitude toward rural dialects is more interesting [than something already mentioned].

More interesting [than something already mentioned] is *the source of the American attitude toward rural dialects*.

We can make a similar switch with a few other verbs:

The failure of the administration to halt the rising costs of hospital care lies at the heart of the problem.

At the heart of the problem lies *the failure of the administration to halt the rising costs of hospital care*.

Some complex issues run through these questions.

Through these questions run *some complex issues*.

Subject-Clause Transformations. If you have a very long subject that does not allow you simply to switch it to the end of the clause, you can occasionally turn it into an introductory clause, allowing you to construct two shorter topics (subjects are boldfaced):

An attorney who uncovers after the close of a discovery proceeding documents that might be even peripherally relevant to a matter involved in the discovery proceeding must notify both the court and the opposing attorney immediately.

[**If a discovery proceeding closes and an attorney then uncovers documents that might be even peripherally relevant to the matter of the proceeding,**] he must notify both the court and the opposing attorney immediately.

Two Principles

Here are two principles that are more important than getting characters into the subjects of your sentences.

1. Put in the subject/topic of your sentences ideas that you have already mentioned, or ideas that are so familiar to your reader that if you state them at the beginning of a sentence, you will not surprise anyone.
2. Among groups of related sentences, keep their topics consistent, if you can. They don't have to be identical, but they should constitute a string that your readers will take to be focused.

Here are two consequences:

1. You may find yourself writing as many passive sentences as active. But if active sentences create a less consistent string of topics, leave the sentences passive.
2. You may find yourself using nominalizations as topics because those nominalizations refer to ideas in sentences that went before. That is an important use of nominalizations: to sum up in one phrase actions you have just mentioned so that you can comment on them.

To account for the relationships among colonies of related samples, it is necessary to track their genetic history through hundreds of generations. This kind of study requires a careful history of a colony.

Here is a quick way to determine how well you have managed your topics in a passage. Run a line under the first five or six words of every sentence (in fact under the subject of every verb in every clause, if you can do it). Read the phrases you underlined straight through. If any of them seems clearly outside the general set of topics, check whether it refers to ideas mentioned toward the end of the previous sentence. If not, consider revising.

Again, do not take this to mean that you have to make your topics identical or that all your topics have to be in subjects. A topic string is consistent to the degree that your reader can see connections in the sequence of words and phrases that open your sentences (and clauses). You will change your topic strings as you begin a new section or a new paragraph. The crucial point is not

to force your reader to begin each sentence in a sequence of sentences with information that the reader will find startling, unfamiliar, unexpected, disconnected from any of the other topics or from the end of the immediately preceding sentence.

The best diagnosis, however, is your own sensibility. When you stuff your prose with nominalizations and passives, it feels bloated. When you jump from topic to topic, your prose will feel different—disjointed, choppy, out of focus. Be sensitive to how you feel when you read and you will develop an instinct for where to look when you don't like what you've written. You will also know where to begin revising.

Some Special Problems with Topics

Audience as Topic

From time to time, some of us have to write for an audience able to understand only the simplest prose. Or more often, we have to write on a matter so complex that even a competent reader will understand it only if we take special care to make it clear. This does not mean “dumbing down.” It means only that we take special care to apply everything that we have said so far—an agent/action style, consistent topics, a predictable flow of old-new information. But we can make our prose more immediate, more available to the reader, if in those sentences we can also make the reader the topic of a sequence of sentences.

Here is some advice on renting a house that appeared in a publication directed to a broad audience:

The following information should be verified in every lease before signing: a full description of the premises to be rented and its exact location; the amount, frequency, and dates of payments; the amounts of deposits and prepayment of rents; a statement setting forth the conditions under which the deposit will be refunded.

That's not particularly difficult for an educated reader. But we can make it clearer, more reader-friendly, if you will, if we bring the reader into the flow of information in the form of *you*:

When you get the lease from the landlord, do not sign it right away. Before you sign, make sure the lease . . .

- (1) describes the place that you are renting;
- (2) states where it is;

(3) states

- how much rent you have to pay
- how often you have to pay it
- on what day you have to pay it;

(4) states

- how much security deposit you have to pay
- how much rent you have to pay before you move in;

(5) states when the landlord can keep your deposit.

I did more than shorten sentences, use simple words, and put agents into subjects, and actions into verbs. I also made the reader and the reader's experience a direct part of the discourse. (I also used a tabular arrangement with lots of white space. Had it been longer, I could have broken it up with headings and subheadings.)

Even complex material will yield to this kind of revision. If, for example, you are trying to explain some complex matter of taxes, imagine explaining the problem to someone sitting across the table. Since that person has to pay the taxes, you would begin most of your sentences with *you*. As you write—or rewrite—simply make a point of beginning every sentence with *you*. If you think the prose sounds too chatty, you can always replace the *you* with some third-person subject—*the taxpayer*. Compare:

To maximize eventual postretirement after-tax cash flow, the decision between a taxfree rollover of the imminent distribution into an IRA, or lump-sum ten-year forward averaging depends on whether the benefits of tax deferral will exceed the benefits of paying a small tax at the time of monthly distribution, though as a general rule, tax deferral will rarely exceed the benefits of a low tax rate.

To receive the most money after taxes, you have to decide what to do with the lump sum you will receive.

- (1) You can roll it over into your IRA and then defer taxes until you start withdrawing it after you retire.
- (2) You can average it over ten years and pay taxes on it now. You will probably have more money if you roll it over because when you retire, you'll probably pay taxes at a lower rate.

It's true that if these revisions are more readable, they are also a bit longer. But we ought not assume that they are therefore less economical, at least not if we judge economy by a measure more sophisticated than counting words. The real measure of economy

should be whether we have achieved our ends, whether our readers understand or do what we want them to. The next is perhaps a more telling example.

In 1985, the Government Accounting Office sponsored a study that inquired into why fewer than half the automobile owners who receive recall letters complied. It found that many car owners could not understand the letters. I received the following. It is an example of how writers can simultaneously meet legal requirements and ignore ethical obligations.

✓ A defect which involves the possible failure of a frame support plate may exist on your vehicle. This plate (front suspension pivot bar support plate) connects a portion of the front suspension to the vehicle frame, and its failure could affect vehicle directional control, particularly during heavy brake application. In addition, your vehicle may require adjustment service to the hood secondary catch system. The secondary catch may be misaligned so that the hood may not be adequately restrained to prevent hood fly-up in the event the primary latch is inadvertently left unengaged. Sudden hood fly-up beyond the secondary catch while driving could impair driver visibility. In certain circumstances, occurrence of either of the above conditions could result in vehicle crash without prior warning.

✓ The author—probably a committee—nominalized all the verbs that might make a reader anxious, made most of the rest of the other verbs passive, and then deleted just about all references to the characters, particularly to the manufacturer. You might try revising this along the lines of the others. Certainly one of the sentences will read,

If you brake hard and the plate fails, you will not be able to steer your car.

Designing Topics

A writer can create quite subtle effects by finding verbs that will let him shift into the subject/topic position those characters that will best serve his purposes. Children learn how quickly. Even four year olds understand the difference between,

When Tom and I bumped, my glass dropped, and the juice spilled.

When I bumped into Tom I dropped my glass and spilled the juice.

Neither sentence is more or less “true” to the facts. But while both have an agent-action style, the second assigns responsibility to an agent in a way different from the first.

We best appreciate this design when we recognize how skilled writers draw on the resources of English syntax to achieve important ends. Here are the first few sentences of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, rewritten from a plausible and coherent topical point view, but rather different from Lincoln’s original:

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 so 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 fitting and proper 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.

Compare the original:

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 that 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, and for the people**, shall not perish from the earth.

Lincoln assigned responsibility to his audience. By consistently topicalizing *we* to make himself and his audience the agents of the crucial actions, Lincoln made them one with the founding fathers and with the men who fought and died at Gettysburg. By so doing, he tacitly invited his listeners to join their dead forefathers and their dead countrymen in making the great sacrifices the living had still to make to preserve the Union.

My revision shifts agency away from people and assigns it to abstractions and places: *the continent witnesses, a great civil war tests, the war creates, the ground will not let, it has taken*. I have metaphorically invested agency and responsibility not in people but in abstractions. Had Lincoln presented my version, he would have relieved his audience of their responsibility to act, and would thereby have deprived us of one of the great documents in our history.

You may think at this point that I am saying it is always good to design prose so that agents always act on their own responsibility; that when we deflect responsibility away from people, when we topicalize abstractions, we create prose that is less honest, less direct than prose whose agents act as topic/subjects. Not so. If in 1775 Thomas Jefferson had followed that advice, he would have written a very different Declaration of Independence. Note in the first two paragraphs of the original how Jefferson seems to have *designed* most of the sentences so that they do not open with the colonists acting as agents, asserting their own actions, but rather with words that topicalize mostly events, rights, duties, needs—concepts that make the colonists the objects of more actions than they initiate, concepts that force colonists to act on behalf of higher forces (I boldface what seem to be main topics of clauses and italicize actions):

When in the Course of human events, it *becomes necessary* for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a **decent respect to the opinions of mankind** *requires* that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We *hold* these truths to be self-evident, that all men *are created equal*, that they *are endowed* by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these *are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*. That to secure these rights, Governments *are instituted* among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government *becomes destructive* of these ends, it is the Right of the People *to alter or to abolish* it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, *will dictate* that Governments long established *should not be changed* for light and transient causes. . . .

Contrast that opening with a version in which the colonists are the consistent and freely acting topic/agents of every action:

When we *decided* that we *would dissolve* the political bands that connected us with Britain and that we *would assume* among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station that we *claim* through the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God, then since we decently *respect* the opinions of mankind, we *decided* that we *would declare* why we *do* so. These truths *are* self-evident—we *are all equal* in our creation, we *derive* from God certain Rights that we *intend to keep*, and among those rights, we *include* Life, Liberty and the opportunity to make ourselves Happy. [Try revising the rest of the passage along the same lines.]

In my version, I have topicalized the revolutionary colonists, making them the main players, acting simply because they will themselves to act. Jefferson topicalized abstractions, subordinating the will of the revolutionaries to a higher force that acts on them. But after Jefferson established the principles that forced the colonists to act by animating and topicalizing a higher necessity, he switched his topic/subjects to King George, an agent whom Jefferson made seem to act entirely out of malign will:

He *has refused* his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He *has forbidden* his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he *has utterly neglected* to attend to them.

He *has refused* to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the

right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He *has called* together. . . .

He *has dissolved* Representative Houses. . . .

.

He *has excited* domestic insurrections. . . .

Someone who believed in the divine right of kings could have made George the constrained object of demands from some Higher Order:

Duty to His Divine responsibilities *demand*ed that Assent to Laws not issue from his office. . . . Prudence *requir*ed His opposition to Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people. . . . *It was necessary* to call together . . . The dissolution of Representative Houses *became needful* when . . .

When he was finished with this bill of particulars, Jefferson was ready to move to his third set of subjects/topics/agents and draw the inevitable conclusion (the capitalization in the last paragraph is Jefferson's):

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attention to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, THEREFORE, the Representatives of the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES;

that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Did Jefferson “intend” to create this systematic sequence of topic/subject/agents, beginning with abstractions, moving to *he*, and concluding with *we*? We can no more answer that question than we can know what any great writer intends. But once a coherent pattern emerges, we have to treat that pattern as part of a design in the service of some larger end.

The lesson to be drawn here (both politically and stylistically, perhaps) is that all local principles must yield to higher principles. The real problem is to recognize those occasions when we should subordinate one principle to another. That’s not something I can help you with. That knowledge comes only with experience.

Summing Up

1. Generally, use the beginning of your sentences to refer to what you have already mentioned or knowledge that you can assume you and your reader readily share. Compare these:

The huge number of wounded and dead in the Civil War exceeded all the other wars in American history. One of the reasons for the lingering animosity between North and South today is the memory of this terrible carnage.

Of all the wars in American history, none has exceeded the Civil War in the huge number of wounded and dead. The memory of this terrible carnage is one of the reasons for the animosity between North and South today.

2. Choose topics that will control your reader’s point of view. This will depend on how creatively you can use verbs to make one or another of your characters the seeming agent of an action. Which of these would better serve the needs of a patient suing a physician is obvious:

A patient whose reactions go unmonitored may also claim physician liability. In this case, a patient took Cloromax as prescribed, which resulted in partial renal failure. The manufacturer’s literature indicated that the patient should be observed frequently and should immediately report any sign of infection. Evidence indicated that the patient had not received instructions to report any signs of urinary blockage. Moreover, the patient had no white cell count taken until after he developed the blockage.

If a physician does not monitor his patient’s reactions, he may be held liable. In this case, the physician prescribed Cloromax, which caused the patient to experience partial renal failure. The physician had been cautioned by the manufacturer’s literature that he should observe the patient frequently and instruct the patient to report any sign of infection. Evidence indicates that the physician also failed to instruct the patient to report any sign of urinary blockage. Moreover, he failed to take any white cell count until after the patient developed the blockage.

We can integrate the general guiding principles—not binding rules—in this:

FIXED	TOPIC	
VARIABLE	OLD INFORMATION	NEW INFORMATION

FIXED	SUBJECT	VERB	COMPLEMENT
VARIABLE	CHARACTERS	ACTION	

Organize your sentences so that you open them with old information in the topic position, usually with a character as a subject. Then follow the subject with a verb that expresses a crucial action. Move complex information to the end of your sentence. Then be certain that your string of topics is consistent and appropriate. At this point, your good judgment has to take control.