

n the Papers

# HOW TO OVERBURDEN YOUR READER: SEPARATE YOUR SUBJECT FROM YOUR VERB

GEORGE . GOPEN

The author is Professor Emeritus of the Practice of Rhetoric at Duke University.

We should stop evaluating the readability of our sentences by looking at the combination of the meanings of words and look instead at the structure in which the words are assembled. Take this sentence, for example:

1a. The trial court's conclusion that the defendants made full disclosure of all relevant information bearing on the value of Knaebel's stock is clearly erroneous.

The sentence is hard to read. Why? It feels long, but not because it contains 24 words. Nor are any of its words unfamiliar. It is hard to read because of its structure. Its verb ("is") is separated from its subject ("conclusion") by 17 words—71 percent of the sentence. This is a burdensome wait because of the reader's expectation that every grammatical subject will be followed almost immediately by its verb.

The subject tells us who is doing the action; the verb tells us what is happening. Those two pieces of information need to be experienced together. In our reading

process, we need to "hear" them reverberating at the same silent decibel level. Waiting for the verb to appear is like waiting for the second shoe to drop. If that arrival is delayed long enough, eventually it commands all available attention.

As a result, anything that intervenes between subject and verb is read as interruptive. If the interruption is brief and easily distinguishable, it causes no problem:

SUBJECT, however, VERB. . . .

If it is slightly longer, but digestible in one gulp, it still will not be likely to overburden us:

SUBJECT, except on Tuesdays, VERB. . . .

If, however, that interruption grows to great length, we begin to grow weary under the burden of continually having to wait for the verb's arrival:

SUBJECT, except on Tuesdays, but not if it is raining, unless it had also rained on the previous Monday, VERB. . . .

But worst of all is the case when the interruptive material is the information the writer wanted us to emphasize the most. Its structural location tells us one thing—"Don't pay much attention to me because you're still waiting for the verb to arrive"; but the author intends that information to be shouting, "Look at me! I'm the most important thing here!" That is the most serious problem with sentence (1a) and thousands of sentences just like it.

The moment we read the grammatical subject "conclusion," we gear up to experience the arrival of its verb. But instead of the verb, we get a "that" clause. During the reading of the "that" clause, much of our reading energy must be set aside to continue anticipating the arrival of the main verb.

But within the interruptive "that" clause, we encounter a second subject-verb combination. When that subordinate subject appears, we formulate a second verb-arrival expectation—this time for the verb of the "that" clause. We are now dealing with two expectations aimed at the arrival of two separate verbs, the second of which must arrive first. That is a complicated reading task.

When that second verb finally arrives, so long awaited, it tells us nothing that we did not already know about the subject. Then we encounter a negative label, "clearly erroneous," and the door slams shut. We realize that whatever the sentence was meant to communicate, we have missed it.

We tend to blame ourselves for such a lack of comprehension. If that describes you, then, please, stop feeling bad. The fault here is not yours, but the writer's. If you have been paying a modicum of attention to a sentence but find its sense imperceptible even though its words are recognizable, it is most likely the fault of the writer. Perhaps all the necessary words are on the page, but they do not appear in the proper structural locations to send you the necessary instructions for the interpretive process.

We can repair the damage easily enough: Just move the verb next to its subject and reconstruct further as seems necessary.

For our sample sentence, we can move the main verb, "is," next to its subject, "conclusion."

The revision of the first clause:

1b. The trial court's conclusion is clearly erroneous....

"Is" is the verb; but is it the action? The author told me he intended two actions—"conclusion" and "erroneous"—the second of which was more important than the first. We can signal that to the reader by making them both verb forms, but giving the main verb over to the more important action:

1c. The trial court clearly erred in concluding that....

Notice how we are now free to pay full attention to whatever comes after the "that." We are no longer holding something in reserve, waiting for a main verb that has yet to arrive. We also are now informed that we should color everything in the "that" clause stupid.

We must understand, however, that version (1c) is not necessarily the "right" version, or even a "better" one. It certainly is stronger in the force of its accusation of the court's error, but there are times when such strength can be a drawback. What, for instance, if the writer will have to appear in front of this court two months later to argue a different case? Under that condition, "The trial court clearly erred in concluding that..." could now be too strong. In such a case, what could we do?

The court had done two actions: (1) it had "erred," which it was not supposed to do, and (2) it had "concluded," which it was supposed to do. To soften the accusation, we could shift the focus to the more acceptable action by making "concluded" the main verb. We would reduce the inappropriate action to the grammatical status of an adjective:

1d. The trial court erroneously concluded that....

This is softer than (1c).

Might there be a situation in which (1d) is still too harsh? If so, to soften it even further, add marshmallow: We could have the court do nothing, by not allowing it to be the grammatical subject. We could put the blame on the "conclusion":

1b. The trial court's conclusion is clearly erroneous....

Let us turn now to the contents of the "that" clause:

... that the defendants made full disclosure ...

Once again the author had failed to communicate to us the action by announcing it in the verb. The defendants did not "make" anything; they "disclosed" something—or failed to disclose it. We can make that action clearer by making it the verb:

1e. ... that the defendants fully disclosed ...

If we opt for the strongest version of the initial clause, here is our complete revision:

1f. The trial court clearly erred in concluding that the defendants fully disclosed everything they knew that was relevant to the value of Knaebel's stock.

The concepts communicated by sentence (1f) are not as difficult as they appeared to be in sentence (1a). The sentence no longer seems long, even though it has the same number of words as the original. The big difference: Sentence (1f) does not misuse reader energy by mis-locating its information. To experience how powerful that mis-location can be, read once again the original sentence (1a), noting how difficult the sentence remains, even though we have just spent a great deal of energy contemplating its contents:

1a. The trial court's conclusion that the defendants made full disclosure of all relevant information bearing on the value of Knaebel's stock is clearly erroneous.

... as long as we have to wait for the arrival of the verb, we cannot be paying enough appropriate attention to the intervening material.

There are two additional reasons (1f) reads with so much more ease than (1a):

- In (1f), no piece of information arrives for which we are not already somewhat prepared; and
- The arrival of every new word seems to "lean forward" with possibilities as to where we might go from here.

These are two benchmarks of good, clear writing. To demonstrate how these function in sentence (1f), here is a slow-motion replay of how a reader well might experience the interpretive journey:

The trial court ...  
("Well, what did they do?")  
clearly erred ...  
("Made a mess of things, did they? How did they do that?")  
in concluding ...  
("In concluding what?")  
that the defendants ...  
("... and what did they do?")  
fully disclosed ...  
("What did they disclose?")  
everything they knew ...  
("Knew? About what?")  
that was relevant ...  
("Relevant to what?")  
to the value of Knaebel's stock.  
("... h, yes.")

Important: I am not suggesting a new rule that we should never interrupt between a subject and its verb. Rather, I am indicating that whenever you do this, the intervening material will be read with far less emphasis. Sometimes that is to be desired.

2a. You may never, except on Sunday, park in the lot.

2b. You may never park in the lot, except on Sunday.

Sentence (2a) undercuts the exception; sentence (2b) emphasizes it. Reader expectations should serve you not as rules, but rather as tools.