

Glaser, Joe. *Understanding style: Practical ways to improve your writing*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

**RULES OF THUMB** Many points about effective sentences can be stated as general maxims. The writing tips in this chapter are loosely organized and may repeat material from other chapters. But all are highly practical. One or two may be just the quick fix you need.

1. **START MOST SENTENCES WITH THE SUBJECT** The usual order of sentence elements is subject-verb-complement, and good writers structure most of their sentences this way. The subject is (or should be) what the sentence is about. Bringing it immediately to the reader's attention makes for clear communication and helps your sentences sound natural and unaffected. An quick survey of professional writers' work in good popular magazines and books suggests that they begin about two-thirds of their sentences with the subject. That's a good percentage of subject-first sentences to keep in mind when you write. When professional writers put something other than the subject first, it's generally an adverbial, usually a prepositional phrase, a sentence modifier, or an adverbial clause: In July, Blevins announced another new theory, (prepositional phrase)  
Thanks to acid rain whole mountainsides are covered with ghost forests of dead trees, (sentence modifier) Although the proposal passed, the margin was slim, (adverbial clause) **You should generally avoid sentences that open with long modifying phrases** or clauses and sentences that invert **the normal sentence order**:

**Originating in the 1920's and dominating public architecture during the '50s and '60s was the angular and severely functional international style.**

(This sentence puts the complements first, then the verb, then the subject, international style.)  
A nonmetallic element discovered in 1811 by Bernard Courtois and the least active halogen, iodine has important medicinal and industrial uses. (The subject, iodine, is preceded by a long appositive phrase.) **While sentences like these may occasionally provide welcome variety,** most can be improved by rewriting to put the subject first. Others can be broken into two or more sentences, each with a subject of its own: The angular and severely functional international style originated in the 1920's and dominated public architecture during the '50s and '60s. The nonmetallic element iodine was discovered in 1811 by Bernard Courtois. Iodine, the least active halogen, has important medicinal and industrial uses. -----

**Exercise 1** ----- Rewrite the following sentences to put the subject at or near the beginning. Start at least one of your revisions with a short adverbial phrase or clause. In another, break the original sentence in two. What effect do your changes have on the writer's voice?

- 1 1. Years after founding phenomenology, a painstaking philosophical study of the laws governing conscious experience, Edmund Husserl concluded objects had no existence outside the mind.

2. Outgrowths of follicles arranged in certain tracts and forming a protective, decorative, and functional layer outside the skin, birds' feathers may have evolved from the scales of Mesozoic reptiles.

3. Because the United States resolutely maintained neutrality during the conflicts between France and Britain brought about by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars and because the angry British began to impress American sailors and confiscate American cargoes in retaliation, the War of 1812 began.

### **CRAFTING CLEAR, PLEASING, AND COHERENT SENTENCES**

**2. MAKE YOUR SUBJECTS DEFINITELY NAMED ACTORS** There are two points to remember here: you should name the subject of each sentence clearly, and your subjects should be well chosen—the true doers of the actions you're discussing, not just a related idea. Whenever possible these subject-actors should be people. Suppose you were writing a sentence about Martinique in the West Indies and wanted to explain that French settlers exterminated the native Indians, replacing them with African slaves. Unless you had a special purpose—like recounting European crimes against native Americans—your best subject would probably be the obvious one, French settlers. Don't say European interests exterminated the native Carib Indians and replaced them with African slaves. French settlers is **much more precise than** European interests. Choosing nominalizations (nouns made from verbs) for your subjects or using passive constructions (in which instead of doing something the subject has something done to it) makes the sentence even less effective: Extermination of the native Carib Indians and their replacement with African slaves was the work of French settlers, (nominalized subjects in italics) The native Carib Indians were exterminated and African slaves were brought in by French settlers, (passive verbs in italics) best way around all these faulty choices is to pick a subject that clearly identifies the real actor you have in mind along with active verbs that plainly say what the subject did: French settlers exterminated the native Carib Indians and replaced them with African slaves

**3. MAKE YOUR VERBS NAME DEFINITE ACTIONS** Strong verbs name definite actions—not always physical actions like hit or kick, but ones with clear meanings: deceive, rationalize, insist, tolerate. Avoid weak verbs like concern, establish, or have that are often used in vague ways, and be especially leery of the weakest of them all, to be. If weak verbs are undermining your writing, replace at least half of them with stronger choices: Not Poverty is an important factor in most social problems. But Most social problems feed on poverty. Not We acknowledge a need to establish why the mine explosion occurred. But We need to know why the mine exploded. Revise the following sentences to provide more definite and expressive actors and actions. If the original wording is so vague you can't tell what it means, make up your own specific meanings. How do your revisions change the writer's voice? (Actors and actions to be replaced appear in italics.)

1. Certain parties have indicated that there may be problems with the way airbags deploy in various models in our product line.

2. A major recording artist has developed a promising marketing concept related to her latest album. 3

. Native peoples were introduced to European disorders and, lacking antibodies to control these, succumbed in disproportionate numbers.

**4. WRITE MOSTLY IN INDEPENDENT CLAUSES** More than half of your sentences should be composed of one or more independent clauses able to stand by themselves as separate sentences. And as a general rule, none of your sentences should have more than three dependent clauses, or clauses that need to be attached to an independent clause in order to be complete. Dependent clauses have a grammatical function within another clause. They may function as nouns (“Ivan wouldn’t say what was wrong”), adjectives (“The one that I like best is blue”), or adverbs (“They checked their inventory while we waited”). They don’t make sense on their own. In his book *A Writer’s Companion* Richard Marius analyzes samples of good popular writing to show the number of dependent clauses in each. Examining 95 sentences from current magazines and books, Marius found only 56 dependent clauses. **More important, 65 of the sentences—roughly 70 percent—contained no dependent clauses.** No sentence contained more than three dependent clauses. My own two-hour survey confirmed Marius’ results, but I did find a sentence with five dependent clauses in a guide to the *Iliad*. It’s pretty bad. The author mentions that Aithra, the mother of Theseus, appears in Troy as a handmaid to Helen and her presence requires an explanation. Then he goes on (dependent clauses in brackets): This was forthcoming in the story, known as early as the epic cycle, [that [when Helen was carried off by Theseus and Perithos, some time [before she married Menelaos,] her brothers Kastor and Polydeukes rescued her]] and, [while doing so, they carried off in reprisal Theseus’ mother Aithra,] [who thus became a slave of Helen.] Malcolm M. Willcock, *A Companion to the Iliad* Willcock is a good writer, and this sentence is not typical of his work, but it could certainly stand simplifying. To improve a logjam like this, divide it into several sentences, removing some of the dependent clauses in the process (dependent clauses in brackets): This was forthcoming in a story known as early as the epic cycle. Some time before her marriage to Menelaos, Helen had been carried off by Theseus and Perithos. [When her brothers, Kastor and Polydeukes, rescued her,] they also carried off in reprisal Theseus’ mother, Aithra. Aithra thus became a slave of Helen. Instead of one sentence with five dependent clauses, the revision offers four sentences with one dependent clause. There is no loss of content and a large gain in readability.

**Exercise 3** ----- Rewrite the following sentences to eliminate half the dependent clauses (in brackets). Change the sentence structure however you like but keep all the major ideas of the originals. Feel free to create new sentences. How do your revisions change the writer’s voice? 1.

[Because some welfare recipients [who had poor work histories] and [who could make only minimum wages] chose to stay on public assistance indefinitely in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin,] authorities designed a program, [which is called “Work Not Welfare,”] to make [people [they considered to be welfaredependent] take charge of their own lives.]

2. [When the program took effect] recipients [who had been on welfare a long time] were told [that they had only two years [in which they could continue to receive benefits]] and [that they had to earn those remaining benefits by performing services [that helped their neighbors and other citizens.]] 3

3. [Although the program appears to be working for people [who have cooperated with social workers and educators [who have trained them for jobs [which have a future,]]]] costs for training, child care, and other expenses proved far higher [than officials expected,] and many targeted individuals have not cooperated [because they didn't believe [they could ever hold a good job]] or [because they simply didn't want to.]

**5.KEEP SUBJECTS AND VERBS CLOSE TOGETHER** The vital actor/action relationship between subjects and verbs needs to be as plain as you can make it. Long interruptions between subjects and verbs put readers on hold while they wait for the thought to be completed. The best revision is usually to move the interrupting element to the beginning or the end of the sentence: Not Our objective, after we have taken the time to define it clearly and draft a plan of action to bring it about, will be paramount. But After we have taken the time to define our objective clearly and draft a plan of action to bring it about, it will be paramount. Or Our objective will be paramount after we have taken the time to define it clearly and draft a plan of action to bring it about. Another revision technique is to shunt the interrupter off into a sentence of its own: We must first define our objective clearly and draft a plan of action to bring it about. Then the objective itself will be paramount.

**6. KEEP VERBS AND COMPLEMENTS CLOSE TOGETHER** Verbs sometimes appear by themselves ("Che lives!"), but they are more often followed by adverbials ("Che lives in Bolivia"), objects ("Che lives the life of a hermit"), or subject complements ("Che seems content"). Don't let long interrupters come between your verbs and these completing elements. Move them to the beginning or end of the sentence or give them sentences of their own:

Not: The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya resulted after a series of highly publicized attacks on Europeans in the relocation of the Kikuyu tribe. But After a series of highly publicized attacks on Europeans, the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya resulted in the relocation of the Kikuyu tribe. Or The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya resulted in the relocation of the Kikuyu tribe after a series of highly publicized attacks on Europeans. Or The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya involved a series of highly publicized attacks on Europeans. These attacks resulted in the relocation of the Kikuyu tribe. ----

----- Exercise 4 ----- The sentences that follow are marred by awkward interrupters. Revise them in one of the three classic ways: (1) move the interrupter to the beginning of the sentence,

(2) move it to the end, or

(3) give it a sentence of its own. 1. Impedance—the degree to which a circuit resists the flow of electric current, a resistance factor expressed as ohms—is sometimes increased by capacitors.

2. Wanda Landowska is responsible through her work as a concert artist and teacher, especially at the Ecole de Musique Ancienne, which she founded, for much of our present interest in the harpsichord.
3. 3 3 Jefferson complained, and he maintained this complaint to the end of his life with bitterness that only increased as he grew older, that revisions forced on his Declaration of Independence by the Second Continental Congress left it a weaker document.

**7. USE SINGLE VERBS WITH MULTIPLE SUBJECTS. USE SINGLE SUBJECTS WITH MULTIPLE VERBS**

Multiple subjects followed by multiple verbs usually add up to too many ideas to sort out easily. Simplify the subject or the verb: Not: Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton threatened and cajoled the

Pentagon's big spenders: But: Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton threatened the Pentagon's big spenders. When this failed they tried to cajole them. Or Jimmy Carter threatened and cajoled the Pentagon's big spenders. So did Bill Clinton.

**8. FAVOR THE ACTIVE VOICE** Cast most of your sentences in the active voice so that the subject does something rather than has something done to it. Passive constructions can be useful when it doesn't matter who performs a certain action ("Foods high in saturated fat should be avoided") or when you want to emphasize results regardless of who brought them about ("As if bloody civil war weren't enough, Angola was ravaged by AIDS"). But most sentences gain force and directness with active verbs: Not The Fourth of July is regarded as our chief secular holiday by most Americans.

But Most Americans regard the Fourth of July as our chief secular holiday.

**9. CHOOSE POSITIVE RATHER THAN NEGATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS**

You save words and communicate more directly when you say what something is rather than what it isn't: Not: She was not without charm. And certainly not She was not uncharming. But: She was charming. You may be tempted to use negative constructions and weak verbs to soften a disagreeable truth. It's usually best to resist: Not The company is frequently not in compliance with accepted accounting standards. But The company frequently violates accepted accounting standards. ----- Exercise 5 ----- Revise the following sentences to avoid pairing multiple subjects with multiple verbs, to make passive verbs active, and to replace negative constructions with positive ones. Sentences may have more than one problem to correct. How do your revisions change the writer's voice? 1. Sally, her mother, and her cousins wandered through Charleston's historic district, shopped for souvenirs, and had lunch near the water. 2. The university has not been placed under sanctions by any agency but the NCAA. 3. The foil, the epee, and the saber—weapons used in sport fencing—are not without an evolutionary relationship to swords once used in actual combat.

**10. FOCUS EACH SENTENCE ON THE IDEAS EXPRESSED BY THE SUBJECT AND PREDICATE A**

predicate consists of a verb plus the modifiers, objects, and complements that go with it. Together, the subject and predicate make a complete idea, which everything else in the sentence should support. Don't let unrelated material pull the sentence too far from this central utterance: Alabama, whose economy was nearly ruined by a boll weevil infestation during the early twentieth century, is a hotbed of stock car racing mania. The core statement here is "Alabama is a hotbed of stock car racing mania." Unless nearby sentences somehow connect stock car racing with the ravages of the boll weevil, readers will find the digression illogical and confusing. Find the boll weevil a home in a new sentence or eliminate him altogether.

**11. MIX LONG AND SHORT SENTENCES** Readers look for the chief actors and actions in each sentence, and these are harder to find in long sentences than in short ones. It doesn't take many long sentences to beat readers down. Inside a small cubical enclosure within the Great Mosque at Mecca, rests the Kaaba, or Black Stone, the most highly venerated object in the Muslim world and the destination of devout believers' pilgrimages, occupying much the same location it had before the coming of Muhammad, when it was sacred to pagan sects of undetermined antiquity. Infidels are strictly forbidden to approach it. A page of sentences like the first one would give anyone a headache. Combining such sentences with short follow-ups like "Infidels are strictly forbidden to approach it" helps by giving readers a chance to catch their breath. On

the other hand, too many short, simple sentences in a row are as bad as a page full of excessively long ones. One short sentence after another makes writing sound simpleminded, like the uncombined kernel sentences in Chapter 10: There is a small cubical enclosure within the Great Mosque at Mecca. Here rests the Kaaba. It is also called the Black Stone. It is the most highly venerated object in the Muslim world. Moreover, it is the destination of devout believers' pilgrimages. It occupies an ancient location. It was there before Muhammad arrived. It was sacred to pagan sects. Infidels are strictly forbidden to approach it. Even if you chose not to shoehorn all this material into one huge sentence, you could combine it into two and still add the short follow-up for contrast: Inside a small cubical enclosure within the Great Mosque at Mecca, rests the Kaaba, or Black Stone, the most highly venerated object in the Muslim world. The stone, which is the destination of devout believers' pilgrimages, occupies much the same location it had before the coming of Muhammad, when it was sacred to pagan sects of undetermined antiquity. Infidels are strictly forbidden to approach it. The point is to combine long and short sentences to give readers the variety they need to stay interested and involved in what you're saying. Remember, this advice applies to breath units—the words spoken together between pauses in a sentence—as well as to sentences themselves. In the final revision of the Great Mosque sentence above, the phrases “or Black Stone” and “The stone” are very short breath units that contrast with the longer units around them.

## **12. END SENTENCES WITH A BANG, NOT A WHIMPER**

The final few words of a sentence most often receive the greatest emphasis, so it pays to put ideas you most want to leave in readers' minds at the ends of sentences. Imagine you were trying to convince readers that your firm would be the best choice to underwrite a stock offering because of its history of underwriting successes. You'd want to use the principle of end focus to place your firm's experience in the position of emphasis: Not We have more underwriting experience than any other firm in the area. But No other firm in the area can match our underwriting experience. -----

**Exercise 6** ----- Revise the following sentences as directed. How do your revisions change the writer's voice? 1. As Nelson bent over her tiny hand a cloud (a towering cumulonimbus, or thunderhead) suddenly obscured the sun. (Remove the digression and use end focus to emphasize her tiny hand.) 2. Social thinkers considered gin, made from fermented cereal grains and flavored with juniper berries, the scourge of the poor in eighteenth-century London, where gin shops dispensed cheap drinks to a laboring populace so degraded by brutal living conditions that only the oblivion of drunken stupor could relieve them from what Doctor Samuel Johnson called “the pain of being human.” (Remove the digression; break up to provide a short contrasting sentence.) 3. Three sects of Jews have called themselves Hasidim, starting with the conservative pre-Christian group whose resistance to outside forces in Israel culminated in the revolt of the Maccabees, then going on to a community of twelfth- and thirteenth-century mystics in Germany, and finally to the present movement, begun in Poland but now spread throughout the world, which emphasizes individual goodness over strict observance of rabbinical law. (Break into three or four sentences with some contrast in length.)

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